

Margery (Mina Stinson Crandon)

Mina Crandon, née Stinson, and better known by her pseudonym 'Margery', was an American séance medium who was frequently investigated in the 1920s. Besides levitations and other psychokinetic phenomena, her mediumship was notable for the 'direct voice' of a male individual that seemed to originate independently of her vocal apparatus. The Margery case, the last major episode of its kind, became the subject of public controversy, with some investigators judging it as one of powerful mediumship, some undecided and others convinced of fraud.

Life

Mina Stinson was born in 1888 in Princeton, Ontario, Canada, the youngest of six children, and grew up on the family farm.¹ She was closest to Walter, her elder brother by five years, a railway worker who died in 1911, aged 28, when a freight wagon toppled off the tracks and crushed him. After completing her secondary education at the age of seventeen, she moved to Boston where she worked as secretary of the Union Congregational Church. She was an accomplished cello player and performed in the church orchestra.

In 1910 Mina married Earl Rand, a grocer, with whom she had a son, John, born in 1913. She divorced Rand in 1918² and in the same year married Le Roi Goddard Crandon, a prominent Boston surgeon then serving as an officer at a local navy hospital, whom she met while working part-time as an ambulance driver. Crandon had been married twice before and was fourteen years her senior. He taught at the Harvard Medical School and had authored a textbook.

Crandon had considered himself a rationalist until he attended a lecture by [Oliver Lodge](#), a British physicist whose bestselling 1916 book *Raymond or Life and Death* described mediumistic contacts with a son killed in battle. He followed by reading books by [William Barrett](#), an English physicist and co-founder of the [Society for Psychical Research](#) (SPR),³ and [William J Crawford](#), an Irish engineer and university lecturer who had investigated physical phenomena by attending sittings with the [Goligher Circle](#) in Belfast.⁴ Crandon was also influenced by Mark W Richardson, a fellow physician and professor of medicine at Harvard, who had become convinced through attending mediumistic sittings that his two young sons, fatally struck by polio in 1909, still lived as spirits.

Following the experience with a medium he proposed that the couple hold a séance at their home, and had a table built for the purpose, similar to the one Crawford had constructed for his work in Belfast. He wrote, 'Six of us sat in red light; the table began to tilt and have raps almost at once, and by elimination we quickly discovered who was to blame, and thus Margery became a medium.'⁵

During a visit to a medium in 1923, Mina believed herself to be in communication with her deceased elder brother Walter. Crandon himself then visited the medium, and said he too heard from Walter. On 27 May, the couple experimented with mediumship for the first time, sitting with four friends in red light at their home at

10 Lime Street, Boston. Table movements and raps reportedly occurred, which by a process of elimination were discovered to happen only when Mina was present.⁶ The other sitters included Richardson and his wife. The Crandons continued to host a small group at their home two or three times a week, the Richardsons almost always in attendance.

Near the end of 1923, the Crandons visited Europe. In Paris, Mina sat for [Gustave Geley](#) and [Charles Richet](#), both veteran investigators of physical mediumship, and was said to have produced strong phenomena.⁷ In London, she sat with members of the SPR⁸ and the British College of Psychic Science, again producing impressive effects, including the levitation under white light of a table designed to be proof against fraud, to a height of six inches.⁹

In the years 1923 to 1927, Mina's mediumship was subjected to investigations by many researchers, most notably by a judging committee of the popular monthly magazine *Scientific American*, which was offering cash prizes to mediums who could produce a 'visible psychic manifestation' to the satisfaction of the committee. This investigation involved no less than ninety sittings. All the major investigations, and two significant and publicly controversial episodes related to them, are detailed below.

In 1939 Le Roi Crandon, aged 57, died of complications from a fall. By this time Mina was known to have a tendency to alcoholism and she now succumbed to it more completely; her last sittings were described by her long-time friend Nandor Fodor as 'pitiful'.¹⁰ She died on 1 November 1941 of complications of chronic alcoholism, aged 54.

Conditions and Phenomena

Sittings were held in conditions variously of red light, ordinary light or complete darkness. Mina's power of movement was constrained by the people beside her, one of whom was usually Crandon, holding her hands. Luminous bands worn by Mina on her wrists and ankles and by the controllers on their wrists would reveal any motion in the darkness.¹¹ Sometimes Mina sat within a wooden 'cabinet', an enclosed space that was commonly thought to help facilitate physical mediumship.

Besides spoken communications by 'Walter' (see below), phenomena witnessed in early sittings were described as follows:¹²

- raps varying in force, 'from the tap of a finger-nail to the kick of a heavy boot'
- raps 'which answered questions coherently through a code of about eight words'
- lights two to five inches in diameter ('pale, non-radiant, non-illuminating, extremely mobile')
- scents of many odours, 'like perfumes'
- musical sounds, 'chimes, bugles, clock-bells, and other instruments, though none was in the room'
- movement of furniture, smashing of the cabinet, lifting of the table with a sitter on it, balancing of unequally loaded scales inside a celluloid cover

- passage of matter through matter
- apports of roses and of a live pigeon
- movements of luminous objects 'visible to all sitters'

An electric bell enclosed within a box and activated by a wooden flap, placed at a distance from the medium, was often heard to ring. The weighted side of a chemical balance-scale, also out of her reach, was seen to rise. Automatic writing was produced in nine different languages including Greek and Chinese (although veridical personal messages were rare).

Of particular note was an ectoplasmic (or teleplasmic) substance said to exude from Mina's body in conditions of total darkness. Glove-shaped wax moulds were said to be obtained by 'Walter' submerging his (temporarily materialized) hands in warm paraffin wax. Photographs were taken of various phenomena, including 'Walter's' hand ringing the bell and a 'third arm and hand' that appeared to extend from Margery's pelvic area.[13](#)

Mina willingly submitted to increasingly invasive controls. She was described by one investigator as 'a highly intelligent and charming young woman, exceedingly good natured and possessed of a fund of humour and courage which make her an ideal subject for investigation'.[14](#)

'Walter'

The sittings were directed by a personality that identified himself as Mina's deceased brother Walter. He communicated vocally, either through her when she was entranced, or independently through a trumpet-shaped cone, a phenomenon referred to as 'direct voice'. Crandon said the direct voice was initially heard as faint whispers and developed over four months into a loud hoarse masculine voice. He wrote:

We thought that, as a matter of common sense and experience, the voice must come from the psychic; we did what any one would do to test it. We put a hand over the psychic's mouth, and still got the voice. We filled her mouth with water: the voice went on, and the psychic later ejected the same coloured water.[15](#)

This test was routinely carried out by other investigators.[16](#) As a further test, Richardson designed what he called a 'voice cut-out machine', a long tube into which Mina blew in order to support two tiny luminescent spheres that would be seen to drop if she opened her lips to speak.[17](#)

One investigator stated that the voice came mostly from within the 'cabinet' in the close vicinity of Mina, but on request could be heard at a distance of up to eight feet from her.[18](#) He added:

This direct independent voice made communication with Walter, the control, so easy that systematic development of the phenomena followed rapidly. ... The voice prophesies or promises the physical phenomenon, then, under test conditions, the thing occurs as promised. New physical experiments and tests

are proposed to Walter, he discusses them with the sitters, he agrees with them as to what conditions should surround the tests and is, himself, apparently intrigued by new apparatus and pleased to get a hard problem.[19](#)

Another investigator described the voice as: ‘that of a vigorous, humorous rough-and-ready man of twenty-five or thirty, with such intonation as a Canadian youth working as a conductor on a street car would use.’ He further described ‘Walter’ as ‘shrewd, unrefined, resourceful and combative’[20](#) and was taken aback by his lack of reverence. ‘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.’[21](#)

The voice was often noted to emanate from different parts of the room in quick succession. One regular sitter stated that the voice was ‘as clear as that of any person in the circle.’

And it was absolutely fascinating and startling to hear him wander about the room. At times his voice would be close to my ear, whispering some very personal comment about me or my family; at other times it would come from a far corner of the room, or from outside the room, beyond the door piled waist-high with books, or from the centre of the table.[22](#)

Investigations

Nine significant investigations were carried out, in which the verdict was either inconclusive, or favourable to the medium (phenomena considered genuine), or unfavourable (phenomena considered fraudulent), as follows:

- 1923 Harvard psychology professor William McDougall, inconclusive
- 1924 *Scientific American* (led by McDougall), inconclusive
- 1924 Eric Dingwall (British psychical researcher), inconclusive
- 1925 Code and Hoagland (Harvard students), unfavourable.
- 1926 JB Rhine and Louisa Rhine (American parapsychologists), unfavourable
- 1926 Robert J Tillyard (Australian biologist), favourable
- 1926 Glen Hamilton (Canadian physician), favourable
- 1926 McComas, Dunlap and Wood, (American psychology and physics professors), unfavourable
- 1927 Hamlin Garland (American author and psychical researcher), favourable.

William McDougall

At an early stage Mina’s mediumship came to the attention of the eminent psychologist and parapsychologist [William McDougall](#), then head of Harvard’s psychology department.[23](#) He began to investigate assisted by Harry Helson, a doctoral candidate. They were particularly interested in the effect of ‘Walter’ stopping clocks in other rooms on request. Determined to impose maximum precautions, they asked the servants to leave; bolted all the main doors and sealed them using sealing wax impressed with McDougall’s thumb print; examined all

closets, trunks and desks; looked under beds and furniture; inspected the clocks for trick devices; and locked the grandfather clock, removing the key. The séance started in red light, with Mina constrained by McDougall and another sitter. Five loud raps were heard and the table jumped towards McDougall, becoming animated 'like a pet dog', then tilted on two legs for half a minute. Raps on the floor communicated greeting and answered questions. 'Walter' spoke while Mina's mouth contained water. At the end of the session the clocks were found to have stopped at 10.30, the time selected by McDougall; the doors were found still to be locked and the seals unbroken.

McDougall and Helson remained unconvinced. In a later meeting with Mina, McDougall asked her to explain the presence of a thread which Helson said he had found tied to a stool that was subsequently seen to have levitated. Mina identified the thread as having unravelled from the fringe of a carpet. Confronted with this, Helson denied having said it was attached to anything and apologised for having made the accusation.²⁴

Scientific American

During a visit to the United States in 1922, the British author and spiritualist advocate [Arthur Conan Doyle](#) challenged the publisher and editors of *Scientific American* magazine to conduct an investigation of psychic phenomena.²⁵ The challenge was accepted and the magazine offered two prizes worth ,500 each to the first persons to produce a psychic photograph and a visible psychic manifestation under test conditions to the full satisfaction of at least four of five judges appointed by the magazine.

The contest was announced in December 1922. Responsibility for coordinating it was given to [James Malcolm Bird](#), a former mathematics instructor and associate editor of the *Scientific American*. The other appointed judges were

- William McDougall, then president of the [American Society for Psychical Research](#) (ASPR) and a past-president of the SPR
- [Walter Franklin Prince](#), a psychologist and principal research officer of the ASPR
- David Frost Comstock, a physicist, engineer, and the inventor of Technicolor™
- Hereward Carrington, a former ASPR investigator and author with experience in stage magic
- [Harry Houdini](#), the famed illusionist, escape artist and sceptic

Bird took almost a year to find a suitable medium to produce a 'psychic manifestation', rejecting several candidates before eventually selecting Mina in November 1923. At the Crandons' insistence, the investigation sittings were held at their Lime Street home. At the first sitting, Prince and McDougall controlled Mina by sitting on either side, holding her hands and touching her feet with theirs. The chemical balance-scale moved and the electric bell sounded, neither from any perceptible human agency or other normal cause. Part of the 'cabinet', a structure that partially enclosed the medium and the controllers, was violently moved around

the room, carrying both Mina and Bird. Dark-coloured 'ectoplasm' was observed to issue from her ears, mouth, nose, navel and groin.[26](#)

A total of ninety sittings were held between April and July 1924. Bird, Carrington and Comstock were each present for more than fifty sittings. Prince attended six and Houdini five, the first only towards the end of the investigation on 23 July.

Bird was the most enthusiastic advocate for Mina. After having already drummed up media interest by writing about her in *Scientific American*, he published an article in which he effectively pre-empted the committee's verdict, endorsing her mediumship as genuine.[27](#) This alarmed Houdini, who had been touring in Europe and so unable to take part. After an initial sitting in which he sat to Mina's left, he claimed to have felt her using her left leg to perform tricks. For the next sitting he created a box in which Mina was fully enclosed, with gaps for her head, arms and feet, allowing little freedom of movement. But even under these conditions, the box lid was broken open and phenomena occurred – caused by 'Walter' according to the Crandons, fraudulently by Mina according to Houdini. On one occasion, a pencil rubber was found in the bell-box mechanism, leading to accusations that Houdini planted it to prevent the bell from ringing. In another incident, 'Walter' accused Houdini of having told his assistant Jim Collins to place a ruler within the box to implicate Mina in fraud: a six-inch fold-up ruler was found, but both men denied having put it there. (A 1959 biography of Houdini[28](#) suggests that Collins admitted to doing so, but this is open to doubt.[29](#))

Following his intervention, Houdini published an illustrated pamphlet giving details of how he believed Mina performed trickery.


 Illustration from a pamphlet published by Harry Houdini, purporting to show how Mina used a leg to create effects by trickery

Illustration from Houdini Exposes the Tricks Used by the Boston Medium 'Mina'. Houdini is pictured to Crandon's left. According to him, even while their calves touch, she is able to operate the bell-box with her foot.[30](#)

Houdini's accusations were contested by Bird, who resigned from the committee, and by Doyle, whose published comments stoked further controversy. Other committee members were sceptical about Houdini's findings, including McDougall,[31](#) who nevertheless had independently decided Mina was fraudulent. On 23 January 1925, while the final verdict was still pending, McDougall wrote to Crandon, stating:

I wish to assure you that my long-continued interest in this case is due to the fact that I am strongly disposed to believe that we have to do with a most remarkable and outstanding case of mediumship, there being a number of facts of my own observation which I cannot explain away by any other hypothesis to my entire satisfaction. On the other hand I have also noted a number of circumstances which do not fit in with the mediumistic hypothesis, and I would

like to state these to you very frankly and have your assistance in my attempt to set all the phenomena in one orderly and acceptable scheme of interpretation.³²

Two weeks later McDougall repeated his concerns in an article in a local newspaper, expressing doubts about the lack of consistency in the production of psychokinetic effects and especially about the production of ectoplasmic material, which he speculated was concealed in Mina's vagina. He now considered this a case of fraud carried out unconsciously by Mina when under the control of 'Walter', whom he believed to be a secondary personality.³³

The committee gave its verdict on 12 February 1925, more than six months after the final séance. It stated that there was insufficient evidence that the phenomena were supernormal, but made no mention of possible fraud. Only Carrington voted in Mina's favour. No prize was awarded to Mina.

Walter Prince stated that possibly supernormal effects occurred during the first three séances he attended, but none in the other three. He considered that only one of these effects could not have been explained by possible normal means, but on that occasion he was not able to judge the circumstances. He concluded that the exercise of supernormal powers had not been 'scientifically and conclusively proved'.³⁴

Carrington attended more than forty sittings and reached the definite conclusion that genuine supernormal phenomena occurred 'frequently'. Many might have been produced fraudulently, but there remained a number of instances when phenomena were produced and observed under practically perfect control, for instance the continued ringing of the bell when both of Mina's feet rested across his knees and both her hands were held firmly in his. 'The bell was on the floor; tipping of her chair would not have reached it as I tested and her shoes were on her feet. The bell was rung intermittently at request.'³⁵

Comstock also attended some forty sittings. He considered that the darkness was an objection, but also that he had seen enough in the light 'to awaken a lively interest'. He concluded that 'rigid proof' was lacking, but that the case should be investigated further.³⁶

Eric Dingwall

While the *Scientific American* investigators were debating their decision, SPR research officer [Eric Dingwall](#) was invited to Boston to give his opinion. Dingwall held thirteen official sittings in January and February (some attended by McDougall and Elwood Worcester, an Episcopal clergyman) in addition to others. In a note published the following year, he commented that the psychokinetic and ectoplasmic phenomena were 'by far the finest that I have ever seen, and if fraudulent must involve a very considerable degree of ingenuity and manipulative skill, coupled with, elaborate and careful preparation.'³⁷ He was particularly interested in the material that apparently issued from Mina's bodily orifices while she was in trance, formed crude shapes and was then reabsorbed inside her body. He wrote:

The materialisations consist mainly of masses of greyish-white clammy substance resembling to the touch a cold and damp blanc-mange. These masses often lie upon the table in front of the medium in good red light, and can be examined during the five seconds or so that is permitted. Objects feeling like clammy tongue-like fins are also observed, and these appear to seize objects on the table and wave them about. Ill-formed hands are sometimes seen covered with greyish or white wrinkled-looking skin, and these formations are all apparently attached to the body of the medium by bands or cords, which to the touch appear gristly, and in places clammy and viscous with knobbly excrescences.

Dingwall stated that he had 'repeatedly' handled the structures and observed them 'closely in fairly strong red light'. The control of the medium appeared 'rigid', but given that one of the controllers was Mina's husband, and might therefore be biased in her favour, he declined to commit to a belief in the authenticity of the phenomena.[38](#)

Three years later in 1928, Dingwall published a more detailed and nuanced account in the *Proceedings of the Society for Psychical Research*, describing and analyzing the phenomena observed by him and others in individual sittings. Here he gave full consideration to the possibility of trickery, arguing that much of the phenomena he witnessed might have been duplicated by normal methods. His suspicions were further aroused by the Crandons' objections to certain conditions proposed by him, also the resemblance (first suggested by McDougall) of the 'ectoplasmic hands' to animal lungs. But in the absence of any obvious motive for the couple engaging in 'persistent trickery' he stopped short of accusing them of fraud.[39](#)

In a rejoinder, Le Roi Crandon claimed that 'there is not one debatable point raised by Mr. Dingwall which has not in the past year been resolved in favour of supernormality'. He suggested that Dingwall had adopted the hypotheses of authenticity and fraud equally in order to cover himself, should the matter be satisfactorily resolved one way or the other by future investigators.[40](#)

Code-Hoagland

Five of McDougall's graduate psychology students, led by Grant H Code and Hudson Hoagland, took an interest in Mina's mediumship and were admitted by Crandon as sitters at various times. All seemed to be favourably inclined. In April 1925, they formed a group to conduct their own formal investigation, and carried out a total of eight sittings, asking Harvard professors to act as their advisors.[41](#) The group placed luminous bands on the heads, wrists and ankles of Mina and her husband in order to expose any suspicious movement. At the sittings, masses were observed around her feet that were both luminous and light-obstructing, also an apparently ectoplasmic hand.

The group moved toward conviction on the genuineness of the phenomena through the first six sittings. However, during the course the seventh, Code observed that one of the luminous anklets had become detached from Mina's leg and was lying on the floor underneath her slipper. He concluded she had tried to free her leg in order to carry out deceptive activity, using the toe of one foot to slide the anklet from the

other. (Crandon pointed out that the anklets provided by the group were much bigger than those that had been used previously, and might simply have slipped off.) In another instance a luminous ring, supposedly being held by a spirit visitor, appeared to Hoagland as if it was being gripped by a human foot.

Code and Hoagland now argued that Mina and her husband were perpetrating fraud, but that they were doing so unconsciously – a compromise they believed would spare the couple embarrassment. Mina, they decided, was impersonating her dead brother in a state of hypnosis brought on by Crandon's zeal and the rituals of the séance. In this altered state, they proposed, she was not aware that she was committing fraudulent acts, which included concealing fake ectoplasmic material in her vagina. Crandon himself, they said, had been blinded to the reality of what was happening, including the effect on his wife's behaviour of his own ideas.⁴²

Henry Clay McComas

In 1926, an investigation was conducted on behalf of the ASPR by Henry Clay McComas, a psychology professor on sabbatical from Princeton, assisted by physics professor RW Wood and psychology professor Knight Dunlap, both from John Hopkins University.⁴³ Following recommendations by Houdini, Mina's 'cabinet' was now glass-walled; her hands and legs were bound with wire, her pelvic area was covered with tape and plaster, and her head was attached to the back of the glass booth by means of a padlocked collar round her neck. Despite these constraints, Jaher writes, Mina 'produced some of her best effects – the quaking of furniture, cold gusts, the crashing of objects, and the jingle of the bell box – the highlight being the flight of a glowing basket along a shelf and into darkness'⁴⁴

McComas again consulted Houdini, who continued to insist that he could expose Mina's methods and stated his willingness to attend a sitting, at which time he would duplicate anything that she was able to do. The encounter never took place. Houdini said he needed first to view Mina in action and then have time to prepare; he left Boston some days later.⁴⁵ However, McComas made the point himself by staging sittings in which phenomena typical of those seen at a 'Margery' sitting were all produced by illusionists' methods, unbeknownst to the guest sitters who were all ASPR members who had been convinced of the reality of physical mediumship almost entirely by witnessing Mina in action. At McComas's invitation, fifteen of them signed a memo stating 'These phenomena were observed by me and I further state that they were done by no normal means known to me.'⁴⁶

McComas was also alone in noting how the lead-up to each sitting lent itself to inclining sitters toward belief. Tietze recounts, starting by quoting McComas:

'When Mrs. Crandon was presented she would completely upset all preconceptions of the famous medium. A very attractive blonde with a charming expression and excellent figure, the "Witch of Lime Street" proved to be a thoroughly feminine lady' ... Frequently treated to dinner, warmed with wine and pleasant conversation, the sitters were given a short talk by Crandon in his quiet well-modulated voice, and show photographs of teleplasmic manifestations. They might then meet Dr. Mark Richardson – "you could not fail to like him", McComas tells us truthfully – and his wife, members of the

“Advanced Circle”. Richardson’s evident belief was impressive. The presence of Dr. Edison Brown and a man introduced as Judge Hill (few sitters were told it was not a title, but a nickname) further impressed the newcomer.[47](#)

McComas and his group concluded that Mina’s mediumship was unworthy of scientific study.

JB Rhine

[Joseph B Rhine](#) and his wife [Louisa Rhine](#) attended a single sitting in July 1927. Rhine, then under the tutelage of McDougall, had begun a career in botany but had recently switched to psychology, partly motivated by a growing interest in psychical phenomena. With Prince’s help the couple had searched for reliable evidence from mediums in the Boston area, but without success. The sitting with Mina was a failure. Like many of the investigators, Rhine was disconcerted by the flippant atmosphere generated by ‘Walter’ and suspected that Crandon, sitting next to his wife, could help her to cheat. Crucially, he said he saw Mina’s foot, clearly visible against a luminous plaque, kicking over a megaphone. Rhine later reported:

We were disgusted to find that at the bottom of all this controversy and investigation lay such a simple system of trickery as we witnessed at the séance. We are amateurs, and we do not possess any skill or training in trickery, and we were looking for true psychic productions, but in spite of our greenness and our deep interest, we could not help but see the falseness of it all.[48](#)

The report, originally intended for the *Journal of the American Society for Psychical Research*, was published in the *Journal of Abnormal Psychology and Social Psychology*. Contrary to most accounts, the ASPR did not reject the paper but rather accepted it by a unanimous vote of its board of trustees. Rhine, however, felt that the seven or eight weeks the board took to decide was too long. He withdrew the paper and it became clear that he had submitted it at the same time to the *Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology*.[49](#) It was noted that Louisa Rhine had not herself seen the ‘tricks’, but accepted her husband’s explanation of them.[50](#)

Robert J Tillyard

Robert J Tillyard, an Australian biologist and entomologist, attended two sittings with Mina in 1926, both at the Crandons’ Lime Street home. He reported the experience during a lecture at the National Laboratory of Psychical Research in London.[51](#) He first stated that before meeting Mina he had met with McDougall, who had warned him of the Crandons’ ‘wickedness’ and gave detailed theories of how they cheated, for instance affecting the balance-scales by means of concealed magnets. Tillyard said he had also been warned off by other Harvard professors, who feared his reputation would be fatally damaged by associating with the Crandons.

Tillyard reported that during the sittings Mina was entirely immobilized, tied tightly with picture wire over rubber insulation and her neck padlocked in a rigid position. He examined the balance-scale, noting that, being made of copper and

wood, no part of it had any attraction for a magnet. Mina went into a trance after about ten minutes and 'Walter' greeted him, jokingly calling him a 'bugologist' and cooperating in the experimental production of effects, which Tillyard was allowed to observe in white light for brief periods.[52](#) For instance, when he placed weights in one of the pans, 'Walter' brought the empty pan down.

Tillyard found the independent voice to be too 'remarkable' to be fraudulently produced and was prepared to accept 'Walter' as a distinct personality:

It might be he was an extension of the medium's personality, for usually – nearly always – he made no appeal unless the medium was there, either in trance or sitting in the chair. The independent voice continued all the way through, and the comments that Walter made on the experiments were keen and interesting.[53](#)

For Tillyard the most interesting experiment involved ectoplasm.

The explanation given by Walter was that he drew from some part of the medium's body a fine mesh-work of living cells connected with the central nervous system. This formed just a fine film, and was apparently hardened up and made turgid and also visible to the eye by being filled with some kind of psychic stuff. Its outward form appeared to be under the control of the invisible operator – in this case, Walter – and it could be molded or developed into various instruments suitable for the particular work at hand.[54](#)

A second trance medium (referred to as Dr Jones) was present at the second sitting. Tillyard reported over a period of about thirty minutes a large mass of ectoplasm piled up on Jones's head, visible in the red light. Tillyard was told by 'Walter' that he could touch it; at this, Jones let out a deep groan, although he appeared to be in a deep sleep. Tillyard described the material as 'white and somewhat shiny, rather like the white part of a large cauliflower cooked and served with white sauce, or ... like cooked sheep's brains'. He said it gave an impression of 'great turgidity and firmness, something like that of a well blown-up pneumatic tire, but there was also a suggestion of a living response to pressure, like reciprocation from a friendly hand-pressure.'[55](#)

'Walter' explained that most of the 'power' was being provided by Mina, while Jones provided most of the material. A wax mould of 'Walter's' hand was obtained, which Tillyard established did not match the hand of any other person present. He also observed the form of a tiny child's hand, that started as a luminous floating cloud, then formed a complete hand showing the tiny fingers, and disappeared as it passed upwards.'[56](#)

Glen Hamilton

T Glen Hamilton, a Canadian physician who had been studying physical mediumship, attended eight sittings with Mina in Boston. He said he witnessed 'brilliant phenomena' under satisfactory control, observing, among other things, the intermittent ringing of the bell-box in good red light without any visible contact and 'ectoplasmic structures' which he considered to be 'undoubtedly of

psychic origin'. The application of Richardson's 'voice cut-out machine', which revealed whenever Mina's lips parted, convinced him that the 'Walter' voice was independent of hers. At once time, he said, Mina's trance was so deep that her respirations were reduced to six to the minute.[57](#)

Two months later, Hamilton held two further sittings with Mina in Winnipeg. At the first, Mina undressed in front of Hamilton's wife and put on a bathrobe that was supplied for her. It took between three and four minutes for her to go into a trance, after which Walter spoke in what was described as a 'hoarse stage-whisper'. Hamilton closely observed Margery, confirming that she was well controlled. The bell-box rang consistently some distance from her and while she was being held by two other physicians in attendance. All the while, Walter joked, teased and even preached. Hamilton concluded his report by writing:

I have now witnessed the Margery phenomena eleven times: eight times in the Lime Street séance room under conditions of careful control; twice in my own experimental room, also under positive control; and once in the home of an acquaintance under arrangements entirely impromptu – and in each instance typical Margery phenomena occurred ... I have no hesitancy in again stating that I am quite convinced that the Margery phenomena are not only genuine but are also among the most brilliant yet recorded in the history of metapsychic science.[58](#)

Hamlin Garland

ASPR members were divided over the authenticity of Mina's mediumship and asked [Hamlin Garland](#), an experienced researcher, to carry out an independent investigation. Garland had earlier become convinced of the reality of physical mediumship, while doubting the involvement of deceased spirits. In 1927 he held sittings in a location of his choice, excluding Crandon from attending. He had Mina searched by a female assistant and bound her to a chair with tacks, tape and dental floss. During the sitting he held one of her hands; the other was held by an assistant. Under red light, Garland witnessed various psychokinetic phenomena, held conversations with 'Walter', had him identify various objects that were concealed from Mina, and collected two handprints which he established definitively were not those of Mina or anyone else present. He concluded that Mina in no way contributed to the phenomena, but was unable to decide whether 'Walter' was an independent entity or a secondary personality.[59](#)

Notable Episodes

Chinese Scripts

Richardson, having heard of a medium receiving direct-voice communication in Chinese from Confucius, asked 'Walter' if he could do the same. 'Walter' replied that he knew no Chinese, but might be able to make indirect contact with the sage. In a sitting in March 1928, Mina – having entered the trance state and under red light, sitting upright and with eyes tightly closed – took her hands from Richardson on one side and her husband on the other side and began writing Chinese characters, rapidly without hesitancy. Experiments were made with the lighting:

151 characters were produced in red light, 43 in white light, and 42 in complete darkness. Most were written rapidly and on the whole accurately, mostly representing extracts from Confucian classic literature. 'Walter' stated that the writing was directed by three followers of Confucius.[60](#)

A Chinese language expert asked to give an opinion characterized the script as 'crude in the extreme', consisting of ordinary modern Chinese written by a poor scribe, and containing nothing that was not a quotation. The script went from left to right, as with English (Chinese script goes from right to left).[61](#)

Sceptics suggested that the Crandons' Japanese houseboy might have been familiar with the Chinese language and taught it to Mina.

Malcom Bird, who recorded the incident, remarked that automatic writing, 'even in a language that is the medium's own, displays all the symptoms of mental confusion and mechanical uncertainty; and it does this in cases where no question can possibly be raised against the conscious good faith of the scribe.'[62](#)

Fingerprint Controversy

Between June 1926 and August 1927, dental wax prints of 'Walter's' thumb were obtained during sittings in dark conditions. A collection of some fifty prints collected by Malcolm Bird and EE Dudley, a fingerprint expert, also included thumb prints of Mina and various sitters, apparently for comparison purposes. An attempt to find a match with a partial print left by the living Walter was inconclusive, as the latter was not sufficiently distinct. In 1932, Dudley discovered that thumbprints of 'Walter', both right and left that had been taken in 1926, matched those of Frederick Caldwell, Mina's dentist, who had been present at the very first sitting together with the Crandons and Richardsons, and who had supplied the wax.

Supporters of Mina in the ASPR suggested that Dudley had intentionally swapped the prints to discredit her, following a falling out between him and Crandon. Dudley replied in a published letter:

I have never controlled the course of these finger print experiments, never occupied the position of control while they were being made, nor had a solus sitting. The prints were made in darkness, therefore, I am dependent on the statements of others as to most of their actions, and these statements I must take on faith, as must the reader of the reports. If these statements are unreservedly accepted it would appear that a considerable number of the prints were made supernormally. I have testified to my part in these sittings, and to my knowledge as to what others have or have not done. Beyond that I cannot properly go ... I have shown that certain prints would be difficult of production by normal means. I think no one would claim that such production would be *impossible*...[63](#)

An article by Dudley describing the evidence was rejected by the *Journal of the American Society for Psychical Research* (JASPR). Dudley then sent it to Walter Prince, who had resigned from the ASPR over what he regarded as Bird's credulity with regard to Mina's mediumship and co-founded a rival organization, the Boston

Society for Psychical Research. He published the article in its *Bulletin*. The debate over the fingerprints continued in several publications, making front page news in the *New York Times* on 13 May 1935.

Confirmation of the match with the dentist's prints came from an independent fingerprint expert, Harold Cummins, in England in 1934.⁶⁴ This discovery resulted in disaffection on the part of JASPR editor Frederick Bligh Bond, previously a strong Mina supporter, who published Cummins' results without the usual authorization and was summarily fired.

Despite lingering uncertainties, the revelation tended finally to discredit Mina's mediumship in the public mind. Mina continued to perform sittings for sympathetic 'investigators', but all further attempts to furnish undeniable proof of paranormal phenomena failed to convince the public.

Bird's Reversal

Malcolm Bird's enthusiastic avowal of Mina's genuineness waned after a sitting on 15 July 1927, where both he and Dudley noticed a 'thread-like connection' attached to the cables of a weigh-scale being used in a new display.⁶⁵ In 1930, Bird presented a lengthy paper to the leadership of the ASPR, in which he confessed he had always known that some normal means had been used to generate the phenomena, giving not only the July sitting as an example but several more, and revealed that Mina had even asked him once to ring the bell-box or otherwise produce phenomena in case Walter did not.⁶⁶ The ASPR, realizing that it would lose all public credibility if it published Bird's paper, suppressed its publication, and Bird received an anonymous blackmail letter threatening to expose him for allegedly fraternizing with an 'immoral' woman if he did not stay silent.⁶⁷ Determined to see his revelations published nonetheless, Bird offered the paper to the rival organization that had been founded by Walter Prince, the Boston Society for Psychical Research (BSPR), however its leaders declined to publish it so as not to continue the controversy. The SPR also refused to print it. In December 1930, Bird resigned from the ASPR and left the psychical research field permanently.⁶⁸

Investigators' Scepticism

Much sceptical commentary today focuses on Houdini's claims to have exposed Mina in fraud. His biographers often represent him as having been the most significant investigator,⁶⁹ an impression furthered by the media coverage generated by his involvement at the time. As stated above, the other investigators attached little value to his claims. Nevertheless, certain other features of the case encouraged scepticism on their part and among already-sceptical observers.

Suspicion attached to Le Roi Crandon's enthusiastic promotion of his wife's mediumship and his insistence on being one of her two controllers during sittings, potentially enabling him to act as her confederate in fraudulent activity.⁷⁰ There were also concerns about the lavish hospitality offered by the couple to investigators, which frequently included meals and accommodation, and which some felt might have been intended to influence their judgment.

Much sceptical commentary relates to Mina Crandon's sexual appeal and her acknowledged tendency to flirt openly with the men around her. Hereward Carrington, one of the *Scientific American* investigators, is said to have admitted carrying on an affair with her,⁷¹ inviting speculation about attempts by her to get him to overlook fraudulent activity.

The Lime Street premises were considered to be an unsuitable venue for experiments. Dingwall stated: 'Although the room was open at all times to a search, it was so encumbered with furnishings that any feeling of certainty regarding its innocence had to be abandoned.'⁷² Bird noted the building's 'architectural complexity (largely the result of extensive remodeling) which surpasses belief ... the whole house fairly teems with curious closets, crannies, cubbyholes large and small, blind shaftways, etc., the utility or necessity of which is not always apparent.'⁷³ It should be noted though that some experiments, notably those carried out by Code and Hoagland and by Garland, took place in other premises.

For Dingwall, McDougall and some others, the ectoplasmic material was especially suspicious, appearing like animal tissue that might, they speculated, have been surgically fashioned by Crandon and produced during sittings from Mina's vagina.⁷⁴ The objection that material of such quantity could not have been concealed in such a way was overcome by the suggestion that Crandon, a surgeon, might also have surgically enlarged his wife's vagina for the purpose.

Legacy

The well-publicized overall negative outcome of the Margery investigations, in particular the verdict of the *Scientific American* challenge committee, effectively brought to an end the international attempts to scientifically investigate physical mediumship that had begun in the 1870s. In the US, the episode is credited with having convinced JB Rhine, considered the founder of modern parapsychology, to turn away from survival-related phenomena in favour of laboratory research into ESP (telepathy, clairvoyance and precognition) and small scale 'micro-psychokinesis', determining the focus of psi research for several decades.

[James Matlock](#) has identified the bias in favour of Mina among members of the ASPR as the cause of a major rift in American psychical research'⁷⁵ A Spiritualist, Frederick Edward, was elected its president in 1923, and by 1931 its journal, *Tietze* writes, was 'displaying a decidedly spiritistic trend. The articles were uncritical and the analyses shallow. Much space was now devoted to enthusiastic discussions of metaphysics and religion.'⁷⁶ Articles purportedly authored by spirits were published without editorial comment.

Members who were sceptical of her mediumship defected to the BSPR, which favoured more rigorously scientific methods. The dispute lasted until Mina's death in 1941, when the two societies were finally amalgamated. 'Mina's death released psychical research in America from a throttling grasp,' *Tietze* writes.⁷⁷ Hyslop regained leadership of ASPR, serving as president from 1941 to 1962 and reviving serious psychical research from an 'amateurish torpor'.⁷⁸ (More details [here](#))

Matlock concludes:

The Mina controversy divided the international parapsychological community and crippled traditional psychical research in the United States; and while I do not want to minimize the importance of Rhine's experimental paradigm, I think that had the Parapsychology Laboratory existed side by side with a stronger and more unified psychical research, we would have a more pluralistic and less polarized parapsychology today.[79](#)

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Endnotes

Footnotes

- [1](#). Biographical details in Tietze (1973).
- [2](#). Details of Mina's relationship with Rand may be found in Jaher (2015), 286-87.
- [3](#). Barrett (1917).
- [4](#). Crawford (1918).
- [5](#). Crandon (1928), 186.
- [6](#). Crandon (1928), 187.
- [7](#). Fodor (1966), 67-68.
- [8](#). Dingwall (1928), 80.
- [9](#). Fodor (1966), 67-68; Jaher (2015), 170-71.
- [10](#). Tietze (1973), 180.
- [11](#). Dingwall (1925), 61.
- [12](#). Dingwall (1928), 82.
- [13](#). Described in detail in Dingwall (1928).
- [14](#). Dingwall (1928), 84.
- [15](#). Crandon (1928), 187.
- [16](#). Dingwall (1928), 189; Carrington (1930), 156.
- [17](#). Crandon (1928), 189.
- [18](#). Dingwall (1928), 83.
- [19](#). Dingwall (1928), 83.
- [20](#). Garland (1936), 309-10.
- [21](#). Garland (1936), 311.
- [22](#). Ralph Harlow, quoted in Jaher (2015), 127.
- [23](#). Tietze (1973).
- [24](#). Jaher (2015), 158-62.
- [25](#). Jaher (2015), 71.
- [26](#). Tietze (1973).
- [27](#). Bird (1924).
- [28](#). Gresham (1959).
- [29](#). Polidoro (2003), 141.
- [30](#). Houdini (1924), 6.
- [31](#). McDougall (1925), 186.
- [32](#). cited in Richardson (1925), 15.

- [33.](#) Jaher (2015), 323-24
- [34.](#) Tietze (1973), 57.
- [35.](#) Quoted in Tietze (1973), 58.
- [36.](#) Tietze (1973), 60.
- [37.](#) Dingwall (1925), 60.
- [38.](#) Dingwall (1925), 61.
- [39.](#) Dingwall (1928), 150-55.
- [40.](#) Dingwall (1928), 157-58.
- [41.](#) Hoagland (1925).
- [42.](#) Details of this episode are given in Jaher (2015), 348-59.
- [43.](#) Tietze (1973).
- [44.](#) Jaher (2015), 377-78.
- [45.](#) Cox (2022).
- [46.](#) Tietze (1973), 97-8. McComas's methods for producing the effects are individually described in subsequent pages.
- [47.](#) Tietze (1973), 92-3.
- [48.](#) Rhine & Rhine (1927).
- [49.](#) Matlock (1987), 230.
- [50.](#) Brian (1982), 38-39.
- [51.](#) Tillyard (1926), 706-7.
- [52.](#) Tillyard (1926), 709.
- [53.](#) Tillyard (1926), 711.
- [54.](#) Tillyard (1926), 714
- [55.](#) Tillyard (1926), 714.
- [56.](#) Tillyard (1926), 716.
- [57.](#) Dudley (1927), 558-59.
- [58.](#) Dudley (1927), 567.
- [59.](#) Garland (1930); Garland (1936).
- [60.](#) Bird (1929), 433.
- [61.](#) Bird (1929), 430.
- [62.](#) Bird (1929), 438.
- [63.](#) Quoted in Tietze (1973), 158.
- [64.](#) Button (1934), 13.
- [65.](#) Tietze (1973), 128-9.
- [66.](#) Cited in Tietze (1973), 137-9.
- [67.](#) Cited in whole in Tietze (1973), 140-41.
- [68.](#) Tietze (1973), 142.
- [69.](#) E.g., Silverman (1996). The sceptic viewpoint is fully represented in Mina Crandon's *Wikipedia* entry. [Web page]
- [70.](#) Dingwall, 86.
- [71.](#) Tabori (1972), 40; Jaher (2015), 245-46.
- [72.](#) Dingwall, 85.
- [73.](#) Quoted in Jaher (2015), 160.
- [74.](#) Dingwall (1928), 150-55.
- [75.](#) Matlock (1987), 230.
- [76.](#) Tietze (1973), 150-51.
- [77.](#) Tietze (1973), 181.
- [78.](#) Tietze (1973), 181.

- [79](#). Matlock (1987), 243.

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