

ARG Owen

ARG Owen (1919-2003) was a mathematics professor and parapsychologist, notable for his poltergeist research and, with his wife Iris Owen, for the landmark 'Philip' experiment that generated both psychokinetic phenomena and communications with an invented deceased individual.

Life and Career

Alan Robert George Owen (known as George) was born on 4 July 1919 in Bristol. He attended a local grammar school, then Trinity College, Cambridge, gaining a first-class degree in mathematics and physics in 1940.¹ He worked as an experimental officer at the Admiralty Signals Establishment during World War II, then returned to Cambridge to obtain a PhD and lecture in mathematics and genetics. Owen was elected a Fellow of Trinity College in 1963 and lectured in mathematics.

Owen married his wife Iris in 1951. In 1970 the couple emigrated to Canada and in 1975 Owen took up a post as professor of mathematics at the University of Toronto, where he later also held professorships in zoology and in preventive medicine and biostatistics.

Psychical Research

Owen described early psychical experiences, notably precognitive dreams described by his mother and rapping sounds heard at the death of his father. However, he states that his interest in such things was 'very mild' and he remained 'relatively neutral' until adulthood.²

During the 1960s, in addition to his academic duties, Owen pursued his developing interests in psychical research. In 1961 he investigated a poltergeist-type case in Scotland and in 1967 visited the Manning family in Cambridge to learn about phenomena being generated by [Matthew Manning](#), a schoolboy who later became known as a psychic and healer (see below).

During this period Owen joined the [Society for Psychical Research](#) and served as a member of its governing council. From 1965 to 1970 he served as secretary of the Perrott-Warrick Electors, an organization set up to allocate funds for psychical research projects. He was president of the Cambridge University Society for Psychical Research from 1967 to 1970.

The Owens emigrated to Canada in 1970 after George was invited to direct the New Horizons Research Foundation, a non-profit organization set up in Toronto to promote research on the frontiers of science. He was editor of the journal *New Horizons* from 1972 to 1977. In 1975 he founded the Toronto Society for Psychical Research to investigate ESP and psychokinetic phenomena. For a period of five years (1975-80) he investigated a variety of psychical phenomena, continuing with his posts in both organizations until 1984.

Owen's description of the [Sauchie](#) poltergeist case and analysis of historical cases, described in his book *[Can we Explain the Poltergeist?](#)* (1964), won him the William McDougall Award of the Parapsychology Laboratory of Duke University for distinguished work in parapsychology.

Investigations

Poltergeists

Owen travelled to Sauchie, Scotland in early 1961 to interview witnesses of [poltergeist-type phenomena](#) that had occurred in the household of an Irish family.³ The disturbances, anomalous rapping sounds and movements of furniture, were associated with eleven-year-old Virginia Campbell and witnessed by family members and neighbours, also a local vicar, doctor and school teacher. Owen found their reports credible and concluded that hallucination and hoaxing were not viable explanations. He found no reason to attribute the phenomena to a discarnate agency, speculating that the effects resulted from the emotional stress and physical changes in Virginia occurring as a result of entering pubescence. (See [Sauchie Poltergeist](#))

Owen's 1964 book *Can We Explain the Poltergeist?* provides a comprehensive analysis of reported poltergeist-type phenomena and potential normal and paranormal causes. Numerous examples are cited, as described by a reviewer:

[H]e lists, dating from ca. 1665-1961, 30 cases which he regards as probably spurious. He further quotes 20 of the older cases in which rank knavery seems to be indicated with relative certainty, and a further 34 cases mostly of a later date in which modern research has continued to expose a variety of human motives which can and do lead to spurious poltergeist phenomena. On the other hand the evidence for deliberate trickery is sometimes inconclusive and a review, of Podmore cases for example, may lead to their rehabilitation (such as the Worksop case) as being genuine and well-attested. We may also with fair confidence accept the Ham case.

Part II is headed 'Some Genuine Poltergeists' and Dr Owen lists 36 cases as having at least one witness of credit and showing either noises or object movements or both. He claims that these cases suffice to establish the reality of the classic poltergeist haunting, though they are not claimed to be all of equal evidential value.⁴

Matthew Manning

During his childhood the British psychic [Matthew Manning](#) (born 1955) seemed to be the focus of poltergeist-type effects, which led to him producing automatic writing and artworks credited to deceased entities. Many such incidents were witnessed over an extended period by his family and staff and pupils at his boarding school. Owen visited the family in 1967 and his findings were described by Manning in his own book on these early experiences.⁵

In 1974 Owen invited Manning to Toronto, where he gave informal demonstrations, moving a compass needle without physical contact and bending metal objects whilst being monitored by an EEG machine. (See [Matthew Manning](#))

Similar tests were carried out with [Uri Geller](#) under the Owens' supervision with outcomes they believed to be 'genuine and paranormal'.⁶

Philip Experiment

In 1972 a group of members of the Toronto Society for Psychical Research, carried out an [experiment in psychokinesis](#), which was led by Iris and attended by George. They invented a fictitious character named Philip Aylesford, an English seventeenth-century aristocrat with a sensational backstory that included a beautiful mistress who was burned at the stake and spying activities for the king, and ended with his suicide aged thirty. The sessions resembled a spiritualist séance with the exception that none of the participants claimed psychic abilities. Early efforts to make contact with 'Philip' through meditation failed, but after the protocols were changed to a more lighthearted approach the sessions generated raps and vigorous table movements. Communications from a putative deceased entity were received by means of raps, and these tended to correspond to the details that the group had invented.

Iris Owen and Margaret Sparrow wrote a detailed description of the experiment in their (1976) book [Conjuring up Philip](#) (see [Philip Psychokinesis Experiments](#))

A second similar experiment also succeeded in generating psychokinetic phenomena and communications from a fictitious deceased individual.

Further Information

[Reminiscences by friends and associates of the Owens](#) have been published by John Colombo,⁷ including contributions by [William Roll](#), [John Beloff](#), [Michael Persinger](#) and [Guy Lyon Playfair](#). The book also contains chapters by ARG Owen on the history and activities of the New Horizons Research Foundation and the Toronto Society for Psychical Research. In a concluding chapter, Owen, reflects on his thinking and activities in psychical research.

Works

Books

Can We Explain the Poltergeist? (1964). New York: Garrett Publications.

Hysteria, Hypnosis and Healing: The Work of J.M. Charcot (1971). New York: Garrett Publications.

Science and the Spook (1971, with V. Sims). New York: Garrett Publications.

Psychic Mysteries of the North (1975). New York: Harper & Row.

Articles

Generation of an 'aura': A new parapsychological phenomenon (1972). *New Horizons*, 9-23.

Uri Geller's metal phenomena: An eye-witness account (1974). *New Horizons* 1, 164-71.

A preliminary report on Matthew Manning's physical phenomena (1974). *New Horizons* 1, 172-73.

Melvyn Willin

Literature

Colombo, J.R. (1995). [*Conjuring Up the Owens*](#). Toronto: Colombo & Company.

Fisk, G.W. (1965). Review of *Can We Explain the Poltergeist?*, by A.R.G. Owen. *Journal of the Society for Psychical Research* 43, 93-97.

Manning, M. (1975). *The Link*. New York: Henry Holt and Co.

Owen, A.R.G. (1964). *Can We Explain the Poltergeist?* New York: Garrett Publications.

Owen, A.R.G. (1976). PK reports from various countries: Canada. *Journal of the Society for Psychical Research* 48, 322-24.

Owen, I., & Sparrow, M. (1976). *Conjuring up Philip*. Ontario, Canada: Fitzhenry & Whiteside.

Playfair, G.L. (2004). Obituary: George Owen. *Journal of the Society for Psychical Research* 68, 279.

Endnotes

Footnotes

- [1](#). Playfair (2004).
- [2](#). Colombo (1965), 69-70
- [3](#). Owen (1964).
- [4](#). Fisk (1965), 94.
- [5](#). Manning (1975).
- [6](#). Owen (1976), 323.
- [7](#). Colombo (1965).