

William Salter

William Salter (1880-1969) was a lawyer and psychical researcher, a one-time president of the Society for Psychical Research, with a particular interest in mental mediumship and the cross-correspondences.

Life and Career

William Henry Salter was born on March 19 1880 in London, where he attended St Paul's School. He read classics at Trinity College, Cambridge in 1899, acquired a law degree there in 1902 and was called to the bar in 1905. He served with the munitions ministry during World War I and in 1918 was awarded the MBE.

He married Helen de G Verrall in 1915.

Psychical Research

Salter joined the [Society for Psychical Research](#) in 1916, being co-opted to its governing council in 1919 and appointed treasurer the following year. He was honorary secretary from 1924 until 1958, and president from 1947 to 1948.

Salter published two books connected with psychical research. *Ghosts and Apparitions* (1938), and a general overview *Zoar* (1961). *Zoar* focused particularly on mental mediumship and related non-physical phenomena, for which alone he considered there was really good evidence.^{[1](#)}

Salter contributed to articles devoted to the pioneers of the SPR and wrote other reports on a wide range of subjects. He took a particular interest in [Borley Rectory](#), a putative haunting case investigated by [Harry Price](#) that became the subject of national publicity, visiting the site and interviewing some of the principal figures.^{[2](#)}

Salter and his wife also participated in telepathy experiments with Gilbert Murray in 1931.^{[3](#)}

Cross-correspondences

Salter was particularly interested in the cross-correspondences, a body of material produced in the early twentieth century mainly by automatic writing (a type of mental mediumship) and purporting to be communicated by deceased individuals associated with the SPR. These appeared to be trying to give evidence of having survived death by creating deliberate links between the productions of different automatic writers, largely in the form of allusions to classical literature, in which they happened to be well-versed. One of the principal automatists was Margaret Verrall, a Cambridge classics lecturer and mother of his wife Helen Verrall, who herself produced material received automatically. Besides being personally acquainted with key automatists, Salter corresponded extensively with SPR colleagues who investigated them, notably Gerald Balfour and John Piddington.

Salter deposited two collections of papers relating to the cross-correspondences at the SPR's archive in Trinity College, Cambridge in 1963. He also deposited thirty-two privately printed volumes of automatic scripts written by himself and other investigators.

Experiment

It has sometimes been argued that the web of allusions apparently contained in the cross-correspondences material might have occurred naturally and by pure chance, and been given undue significance by investigators looking for suggestive patterns.

To test this, Salter carried out an experiment with 'pseudo-scripts'.⁴ He recruited fourteen people who did not claim mediumistic ability, gave them a list of phrases (including lines from works of literature), and asked them to write down words, phrases and sentences that these allusions suggested to them. The aim was to see whether correspondences would appear in these pseudo-scripts similar to those found in the material produced by automatists.

Salter expected that more chance correspondences would be found than in a similar earlier experiment, in which the writers were given no starting point to work from. But the incidence of correspondences proved to be negligible here also. Salter concluded that, while the absence of correspondences in the pseudo-scripts did not mean those found in genuine scripts could not be the results of common association of ideas and/or telepathy, it argued against such ideas being 'rashly invoked as obvious, complete, satisfactory explanations of the phenomena of the real scripts'.⁵

Works

Books

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Pamphlet

Trance mediumship: An introductory study of Mrs Piper and Mrs Leonard (1950). London: SPR.

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281-330.

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The SPR and the Myers sealed packet (1955). *Journal of the Society for Psychical Research* 38, 18-20.

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Our pioneers V. Edmund Gurney (1959). *Journal of the Society for Psychical Research* 40, 47-52.

Obituary: Mrs Lydia Allison (1959). *Journal of the Society for Psychical Research* 40, 98-100.

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The Palm Sunday Case – A note on interpreting automatic writings (1960). *Journal of the Society for Psychical Research* 40, 275-85.

Our pioneers VIII. Richard Hodgson (1960). *Journal of the Society for Psychical Research* 40, 329-34.

Obituary: Rudolf Tischner (1961). *Journal of the Society for Psychical Research* 41, 168-69.

Obituary: G.A. Smith (1961). *Journal of the Society for Psychical Research* 41, 219-21.

Obituary: Lord Charles Hope (1962). *Journal of the Society for Psychical Research* 41, 394-95.

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Endnotes

Footnotes

- [1.](#) Broad (1970), 206.
- [2.](#) Dingwall, Goldney, & Hall (1956).
- [3.](#) Salter (1941), 29-38.
- [4.](#) Salter (1927), 525-54.
- [5.](#) Salter (1927), 546.