

# GNM Tyrrell

GNM Tyrrell (1879-1952) was an English mathematician, physicist and radio engineer. He was actively involved in psychical research for much of his life and is noted in particular for his commentary on the topic of apparitions.

## Early Career

George Nugent Merle Tyrrell was educated at Seaford Engineering College and London University where he studied physics and mathematics. He was a student of Marconi, whose work he demonstrated to the government in Mexico in 1908. He served in World War I as a signals officer in the Royal Artillery.

## Psychical Research

After the war Tyrrell dedicated his time to psychical research. He was an active member of the [Society for Psychical Research](#), serving as president from 1945 to 1946.

## Experimental Research

In 1921 he worked with Gertrude Johnson (referred to in his reports as Nancy Sinclair), a gifted subject who demonstrated high scoring in tests of telepathy, clairvoyance, automatic writing and crystal scrying.<sup>1</sup>

Testing Johnson's ability to find objects, he designed an apparatus consisting of five small boxes mounted behind a board into any one of which the experimenter, unseen by her, could thrust a pointer, requiring her to identify it.<sup>2</sup> In a refined version each box was fitted with a small electric lamp that glowed when a corresponding key was pressed by the operator. Results were recorded automatically on a paper tape.<sup>3</sup> This is one of the earliest mechanical ESP tests, which, however, was considered to have been marred by inadequate randomization.

## Apparitions

In 1942, Tyrrell was invited to give a lecture to the Society for Psychical Research, surveying its achievements to date.<sup>4</sup> Preparing the talk, he started by looking at its work on apparitions, but then decided to devote the whole of it to this subject, having been 'forcibly struck' by the strength of the evidence provided by these spontaneous narratives and the light they shone into the workings of human personality.<sup>5</sup> The talk was expanded into his book *Apparitions* published the following year.

Tyrrell proposed four types of apparitional experiences:

- experimental cases, in which one person successfully attempted to project an image of himself/herself to another person at a distance

- crisis cases, in which an apparition coincided with the death, injury or potential harmful experience happening to the appearing person
- post-mortem cases, in which the appearing person was known to be deceased
- ghosts or haunting cases, in which an apparition regularly appeared in a particular location

Tyrrell considered in some depth the processes involved in the phenomenon of apparitions. He described what he thought of as an 'apparitional drama', co-created subconsciously by the appearing person, whom he termed the 'agent', and the percipient to whom this person appeared. Clearly, the agent had no particular intention of doing this; he merely needed to wish to be with the percipient, or to know what is happening to him, for the exchange to happen automatically.

His part is only to give direction and impetus to the drama and to supply in very general terms the *motif*. The work of constructing the drama is done in certain regions of the personality which lie below the conscious level; and there the agent's general and simple idea is worked out in complex detail.<sup>6</sup>

Tyrrell considered this relation between a simple idea and complexity of expression to be characteristic of ideas in general. A person initiates an action in general terms, he thought, while remaining ignorant of the machinery that carries it out, which is handled subconsciously. The reverse process occurs in perception, where the complex details perceived by the sense organs are integrated into a single perceptual idea. In a much-cited passage, he writes:

Perhaps it would be useful here to introduce a metaphor and to compare the consciousness of the agent to the author of a play, and that 'something' within him which works out the idea in dramatic form to the 'producer'. Further, the 'something else' within him which expresses this drama in the sensory form of an apparition may be compared to the 'executor' or 'stage-carpenter' of the play. These are anthropomorphic terms, but possibly helpful.<sup>7</sup>

Tyrrell thought the apparitional drama is quite clearly in most cases a joint effort, as there are features in the apparition, true to the circumstances, as is later learned, that the agent or percipient could not have known.

Thus the 'producers' or 'producer-levels' of the agent and percipient must get together to work out apparitions; and in cases of collective percipience the 'producer-levels' of the additional percipients must also take part. For it is not merely a feat of multiple perception which is performed in such cases; it is a feat of correlation in which each percipient sees exactly the aspect of the moving apparition which he would see from his particular standpoint in space if the apparition were material. In non-telepathic and non-collective cases only one producer is concerned.<sup>8</sup>

Tyrrell found the way this drama is constructed difficult to understand, not just because it happens below the level of consciousness, but also because the processes involved must be very different from anything which takes place in the physical world and different from purely mental processes as well.

There is something in it which suggests conscious planning. Yet I do not think that we can imagine that the agent's and percipient's 'producers' consciously hold a committee meeting of two and decide on the details of the drama. That is to endow them with too much consciousness. Nor do I think that we can go to the other extreme and suppose that the agent's idea expresses itself through a mechanical pattern which reduces the 'producers' to the level of idea-expressing machines. There is a good deal in the apparition which suggests consciousness and there is a good deal which suggests automatism. The truth is that we are dealing with something between the two extremes of consciousness and mechanism.[9](#)

## Other Books

Tyrrell's 1938 book *Science and Psychical Phenomena* is a comprehensive guide to psychical research.[10](#)

In *The Personality of Man* (1947),[11](#) he discusses paranormal experiences he believes are integral to the full human personality, including inspiration and genius, mysticism, telepathy, mediumship and poltergeists; he also discusses religion and postmortem survival.

*The Nature of Human Personality*,[12](#) published posthumously in 1954, attempts to answer questions posed by readers of earlier books. Discussing postmortem survival, he argues that

the boundary of the apparent self is not an edge where the whole self comes to an end, but is only the limit of an *abstracted* portion of that self, which has been withdrawn and concentrated on the physical world ; and that the whole of space and time perceptible to our senses is also no more than an *abstracted* aspect of the actual whole.[13](#)

## Works

### Selected Books

*Grades of Significance* (1931). London: Rider & Co.

*Science and Psychical Phenomena* (1938). London: Methuen.

*The Personality of Man* (1947). Middlesex: Pelican Books.

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*The Nature of Human Personality* (1954). London: Allen and Unwin.

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The case of Miss Nancy Sinclair (1922). *Journal of the Society for Psychical Research* 20, 294-327.

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Perspective in psychical research (1946). *Journal of the American Society for Psychical Research* 40, 229-40.

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Family telepathy (1948). *Journal of the Society for Psychical Research* 34, 196-204.

The O.J.L. posthumous packet (1948). *Journal of the Society for Psychical Research* 34, 269-71.

Comments on Dr Rhine's 'Telepathy' (1946-49). *Proceedings of the Society for Psychical Research* 48, 17-19.

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Review of *Emanuel Swedenborg*, by Signe Toksvig (1949). *Journal of the Society for Psychical Research* 35, 108-11.

Correspondence: Mr Parson's paper 'On the need for caution in assessing mediumistic material' (1949). *Journal of the Society for Psychical Research* 35, 160-63.

Review of *The Nameless Faith*, by Lawrence Hyde (1949). *Journal of the Society for Psychical Research* 35, 285-87.

A decisive factor in the assessment of evidence (1951). *Journal of the Society for Psychical Research* 36, 355-61.

An experiment in precognition (1951). *Journal of the Society for Psychical Research* 36, 366-68.

Melvyn Willin

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## Endnotes

### Footnotes

- [1](#). Tyrrell (1922), 294-327.
- [2](#). Fisk (1953), 65-67.
- [3](#). Further details can be found in Wilson (1946) and Hallson (2005).
- [4](#). Tyrrell (1942-45), 301-19.
- [5](#). Cited by H.H.Price in a [preface](#) to the 1953 edition.
- [6](#). Tyrrell (1953), 101.
- [7](#). Tyrrell (1953), 101.
- [8](#). Tyrrell (1953), 102.
- [9](#). Tyrrell (1953), 102.
- [10](#). Tyrrell (1938).
- [11](#). Tyrrell (1947).
- [12](#). Tyrrell (1954).
- [13](#). Heywood (1955), 31.