

George Valiantine

George Valiantine (1874-1947) was an American direct voice medium, noted in particular for a variety of foreign languages heard during sittings. Strong claims were made for him by supporters, but indications of fraud accumulated, and he was viewed with suspicion by some investigators.

Life and Career

George Valiantine was born in Williamsport, Pennsylvania. He spent the first part of his life working in industry. In 1918, while staying in a New York hotel in connection with his razor manufacturing business, he was startled one day to hear unexplained rapping sounds outside his room. This prompted a friend to hold a spiritualist séance, at which a dead relative appeared to communicate with Valiantine, urging him to develop his psychic ability. He subsequently practised as a trance medium specializing in direct voice (where communications are made in direct speech independent of the medium).^[1]

Valiantine was tested by the magazine *Scientific American*, at which time indications of fraudulent activity were noted.^[2] Valiantine had strong supporters, notably Joseph de Wyckoff, a wealthy steel magnate, and H. Dennis Bradley, a British author, who staged a large number of sittings which he described in three books, *Towards the Stars* (1924), *The Wisdom of the Gods* (1925), and *...And After* (1931). Valiantine's mediumship was also investigated by members of the British Society for Psychical Research (SPR), with inconclusive results, while indications of fraud continued to accumulate.

Phenomena

Typically at a Valiantine séance, the medium sat in a chair in conditions of darkness while fragments of speech, supposedly made by disembodied voices, emanated from a 'spirit trumpet', a long aluminium cone made up of three sections whose purpose was to amplify the sounds. Two or more of these devices, spotted with luminous paint to make their movements visible, were placed near the medium at the start of the meeting and were then seen to float in the air as the voices spoke.

Principal communicators, Valiantine's 'guides' or 'controls', claimed the identities of 'Bert Everett' (his deceased brother-in-law) and a 'Dr Barnett'. Other regular communicators included two Native Americans and one who claimed to be 'Feda', the control of the British medium Gladys Leonard.

Valiantine was especially notable for the phenomenon of 'xenoglossy', with communicators sometimes talking in foreign languages: French, Spanish, Italian, German, Russian, Welsh, Japanese, and Chinese.^[3]

Scientific American

Valiantine came to the notice of Joseph de Wyckoff, who invited him to carry out sittings at his home in Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania. In 1923 de Wyckoff and Valiantine approached the organizers of a contest being run by the *Scientific American* for a demonstration of psychic ability, for which the magazine was offering a 00 prize. Valiantine was first tested at de Wyckoff's home by Gardner Murphy, a psychology professor at Columbia University, who was accompanied by a New York *World* reporter. The two men were impressed by what they observed, which included spirit trumpets floating around the room, blue and red lights and 'spirit touches'.

Valiantine was then formally tested at the publication's New York premises by the contest committee. Three sittings were held. At the third, electronic sensors had been attached to Valiantine's chair (unknown to him), and these registered a significant loss of weight at precisely the moments when people in other parts of the room felt touches, appearing to indicate that he had left it in order to perform tricks. Claims that a loss of weight necessarily occurred as spirits took power from the medium were rejected by most investigators, and in its published report the magazine ruled him out of contention.^[4]

H Dennis Bradley

From this time Valiantine was championed by H Dennis Bradley, whose books brought him to the attention of a wide public. Bradley, who after sitting with Valiantine himself claimed abilities as a direct voice medium, was quickly convinced by Valiantine, having at a sitting at de Wyckoff's residence received a communication purportedly from his deceased sister. Bradley stated that his sister had a particularly characteristic way of speaking, which the voice exactly conveyed. 'Every syllable was perfectly enunciated and every little peculiarity of intonation was reproduced. We talked for fifteen minutes, and about such subjects as only she and I could have known.'^[5]

However, Bradley also described an incident in which writings purportedly made by deceased communicators were considered by a handwriting expert to have been written by Valiantine himself. This led to disillusion on the part of de Wyckoff, who persuaded Valiantine to do a test sitting tied with rope, at which no phenomena occurred.

In 1924 Bradley brought Valiantine to England where he held a large number of sittings in his own home. Attempts by the SPR to hold test sittings at its premises were opposed by Bradley; instead, investigators attended sittings held at Bradley's home and elsewhere (see below).

Neville Whymant

Neville Whymant worked as a professor of Oriental literature and philosophy at the Universities of Tokyo and Peking and later as professor of linguistics at Oxford and London Universities. While staying in New York in 1926, he was invited by to attend sittings with Valiantine, at which a language sounding like Chinese had recently been heard. Whymant attended with his wife, who obtained communications

purporting to come from her deceased father, speaking in his characteristic West Country accent.

The Chinese voice then emerged, speaking in what Whymant recognized as an ancient dialect, and identifying itself as that of 'K'Ung Fu-Tsu' (Confucius). At Whymant's request it switched to modern Mandarin. A formally-stylized conversation ensued, during the course of which the voice, having heard Whymant recite the first few words of a poem from the Shijing, an ancient Chinese collection, instantly recited the full passage.

During a further eleven sittings Whymant said he conversed with voices in other languages, including Hindi, Persian, Sanskrit, Arabic, Yiddish and modern Greek.^[6]

SPR Sittings

Detailed reports of sittings with Valiantine by Troubridge and Radclyffe Hall and by Charles (Lord) Hope were published in the SPR Journal, in 1928 and 1932 respectively.

Troubridge and Radclyffe Hall

Generally positive statements were made by Una Troubridge and Radclyffe Hall with regard to sittings they attended at Bradley's home.^[7] They observed physical phenomena besides the disembodied voices: touches upon the heads and hands of the sitters, and 'a rapid whirling of the trumpet above my head',^[8] which they felt were beyond what the medium could have achieved fraudulently without the help of an accomplice. In a sitting held in daylight, taps were heard on the trumpet near the medium when his hands were being closely watched, and intelligible whispers were heard when his mouth was closed and there were no visible signs of effort on his part.

They note that

while we are not prepared to state that he spoke actually simultaneously with any "direct" or trumpet voice, he did on several occasions speak from his chair so immediately after a voice had spoken through the trumpet or at the other side of the circle or high up in the far corner of the room, as in our opinion to preclude the possibility of his having spoken in those positions and regained his chair.

He spoke frequently, yawned, moved and breathed audibly immediately before or after the voices spoke, much too promptly, we thought, to admit of his having spoken and left or regained his seat.^[9]

They were also satisfied that 'on several occasions the voices came from inside the trumpet in such a way as could only be produced by speaking actually into the narrow end or into a tube connected with it'.^[10]

The pair noted puzzles relating to the communications, however. One of the 'controls' claimed to be the same 'Feda' that was the guide of [Gladys Leonard](#), a medium who had been extensively investigated by Troubridge and Hall, yet showed

no resemblance to Leonard's Feda, speaking with an American accent, easily pronouncing consonants that Leonard's Feda found too difficult and addressing Troubridge as 'Lady Troubridge', which Leonard's Feda had never done.^[11] Furthermore, a communicator who claimed the same identity as one well-known to the pair from their work with Leonard also showed an entirely different personality.^[12]

Charles Hope

Hope held sittings in his own apartment. He noted that the voices of the regular communicators (guides) were fairly clear.^[13] One in particular, Christo de Angelo, was loud and spoke in Italian. Another claiming the identity of Martin Luther was clear, spoke in non-American accented English, and conversed with a German-speaking sitter in what was said to be old-fashioned German. However, Hope had intended to obtain evidence of postmortem survival and was disappointed that voices attributed to deceased friends and relations of the sitters were too quiet and indistinct to carry conviction. None of several personal communications he received was completely satisfactory.

Hope was unable to vouch for any of the physical phenomena, pointing out that the medium was uncontrolled. However, he added:

The movements of the trumpets ... were on occasions very impressive and on one occasion a trumpet spotted with luminous paint seemed to rise very high and strike something sounding like the ceiling, which was 11 feet 6 inches from the floor. Sometimes two trumpets were in the air at the same time.

If the effects were obtained by normal means the medium's sense of direction must have been exceptionally good. On one occasion something which felt like a large hand was placed on my head without any preliminary fumbling. Another time I bent forward to set up a trumpet which had fallen over and having done so I was lightly touched on the face by something not a trumpet.^[14]

In one incident, pages from a writing pad were found covered with oriental characters, which Hope concluded had been written in the darkness.^[15]

Hope was unable to tell whether the voices overlapped with the medium's, which would have tended to support their authenticity. He made gramophone recordings of snatches of direct voice speech in different languages (now apparently lost). Neville Whyment, having been played the recording of the putative Chinese speech, thought it sounded like a greeting spoken in archaic Chinese, but was unable to get the sense with any confidence.^[16]

In conclusion, Hope stated that he was 'somewhat impressed' by the so-called physical phenomena but had 'no proof whatsoever' that they were genuine.^[17]

European Sittings

In 1929, test sittings were held in Berlin^[18] where allegations of fraud were made.^[19] Some of these centred on the use of the trumpets, with suggestions that one or other of the three sections that had not been painted with luminous paint was

detached by Valiantine and used to make spirit voices while the other sections remained visible at a distance from him.^[20]

Further allegations of cheating were made relating to a test science in Italy in the same year.^[21]

Fingerprints

In 1931, Bradley carried out tests with Valiantine in which fingerprint imprints in modelling wax said to have been obtained from spirit communicators were found to match Valiantine's fingers, toes and elbows. In his third book on Valiantine, Bradley now too accused him of fraud, although he continued to insist that earlier sittings conducted by him had been authentic and to contest claims of fraud made by other investigators.^[22] Confronted by the evidence, Valiantine became emotional, but continued to deny fraud, Bradley recorded, saying only that he could not understand it. Valiantine later defended himself vigorously in a letter, insisting 'that I am perfectly innocent of the charges made against me.'^[23]

Helen Salter

Helen Salter reviewed Valiantine's career negatively, cataloguing the many suspicious circumstances and allegations of fraud. She strongly criticized Bradley, who had adopted an uncooperative and sometimes antagonistic stance towards SPR investigators. She argued that the apparent close resemblance between voices heard during a Valiantine séance and the real-life individuals they claimed to have been, often remarked on by sitters, was due to the power of suggestion 'helped out by the distortion and indistinctness of utterance consequent on the use of a trumpet'.^[24] She conceded that the report by Troubridge and Hall came nearest to providing evidence in his favour. But she argued that the pair underestimated the possibility of fraud being carried out under the conditions they described and questioned their observation that voices were heard when he was not speaking, arguing that 'it does not seem at all certain that with practice a man might not produce all the effects they observed without any movement of the face...'^[25]

Salter cast doubt on the reliability of Whyman's 1926 testimony, arguing that Valiantine's ability 'to produce a passable imitation of Chinese, including perhaps a few actual words of the language, would not be remarkable in view of the fact that America is full of Chinamen'.^[26] She further raised the possibility of fraud by individual sitters and by Bradley or his wife. With regard to the fingerprints, considered certain to have been obtained fraudulently, Salter noted that Valiantine's regular controls insisted on the validity of these, serving further to undermine their own authenticity.

Melvyn Willin and Robert McLuhan

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Endnotes

Footnotes

1. ^ Biographical details from Bradley (1924).
2. ^ Bird (1923).
3. ^ Discussed by Salter (1932), 402-407.
4. ^ Bird (1923).
5. ^ Bradley (1924); cited in Tymn (2013).
6. ^ Whymant (1926); these details cited in Tymn (2013).
7. ^ Troubridge (1928).
8. ^ Troubridge (1928), 56.
9. ^ Troubridge (1928), 61.
10. ^ Troubridge (1928), 55.
11. ^ Troubridge (1928), 56-57.
12. ^ Troubridge (1928), 58.
13. ^ Hope (1932).
14. ^ Hope (1932), 416.
15. ^ Hope (1932), 418.
16. ^ Hope (1932), 419.
17. ^ Hope (1932), 419.

18. ^ Described in Bradley (1931).
19. ^ Kröner (1929).
20. ^ Discussed by Salter (1932), 394.
21. ^ Described by Bradley (1931); discussed by Salter (1932), 395.
22. ^ Bradley (1931), 287.
23. ^ Valiantine (1931), 23.
24. ^ Salter (1932), 391.
25. ^ Salter (1932), 397.
26. ^ Salter (1932), 407.

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