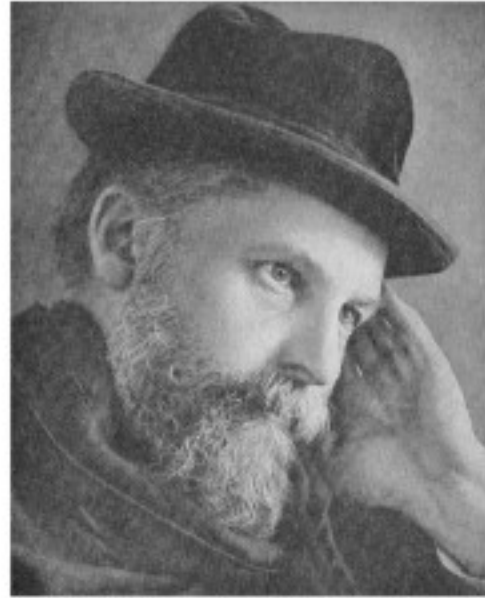


## Biography of Frederic W.H. Myers (1843-1901)

One of the founders of the Society for Psychical Research (SPR), Frederic William Henry Myers (February 6, 1843 to January 17, 1901) is sometimes referred to as the “father of psychical research.” His book, *Human Personality and Its Survival of Bodily Death*, published in 1903, two years after his death, is considered a seminal work in the field. Harvard professor William James wrote that Myers “will always be remembered in psychology as the pioneer who staked out a vast tract of mental wilderness and planted the flag of genuine science upon it.” Sir Oliver Lodge, the esteemed physicist and radio pioneer, stated that Myers had been “laying the foundation for a cosmic philosophy, a scheme of existence as large and comprehensive and well founded as any that have appeared.”

Although not educated as a psychologist, Myers has been credited with developing a systematic conception of the subliminal self as well as a theory holding that telepathy is one of the basic laws of life. In fact, it was Myers who coined the word “telepathy,” previously called “thought transference.”

According to Dr. Sherwood Eddy, a distinguished American writer of the first half of the last century, Myers began to explore the subconscious, or subliminal self, simultaneous with and independently of Freud. While Freud accepted atomic materialism, seeing philosophy as a mere rationalization and religion as outright fraud, Myers concluded that the Power behind the universe is superorganic, in a higher category to which human personality belongs. He saw psychical research as a meeting place of religion, philosophy and science. Since materialism had, in the wake of Darwinism, become the *intelligent* approach, Myers' view did not gain widespread acceptance.



Myers was born in Keswick, Cumberland, England, the son of a clergyman. He graduated Trinity College, Cambridge in 1864, then became a classical lecturer at Cambridge and a fellow of Trinity. By 1869, he had, like most of his Cambridge intellectuals, lost his faith and, concomitantly, his belief in the survival of consciousness at death. Myers wrote that his agnosticism or virtual materialism affected him like “a dull pain borne with joyless doggedness, sometimes...a shock of nightmare-panic amid the glaring dreariness of the day.” He felt that the hope of the world was vanishing, not his alone.

Myers' interest in psychical research was sparked during the 1870s by the mediumship of Reverend William Stainton Moses, then fueled by the mediumship of Leonora Piper. In 1882, he collaborated with Professor William Barrett, Professor Henry Sidgwick, and Edmund Gurney, in founding the SPR in London. In 1886 he collaborated with Gurney and Frank Podmore in his first outstanding work, *Phantasms of the Living*.

But it was his 1903 book that most impacted the field. "In the long story of man's endeavors to understand his own environment and to govern his own fate, there is one gap or omission so singular that its simple statement has the air of a paradox," Myers begins the introduction to *Human Personality*. "Yet, it is strictly true to say that man has never yet applied the methods of modern science to the problem which most profoundly concerns him – whether or not his personality involves any element which can survive bodily death."

In *Human Personality*, Myers explores disintegrations of personality, genius, sleep, hypnotism, sensory automatism, phantasms of the dead, motor automatism, trance, possession, and ecstasy. "In this great book Myers brought together an immense store of information about the always strange and often wonderful goings-on in the upper stories of a man's soul-house," wrote Aldous Huxley in the foreword to the 1961 republication of *Human Personality*. "And this information he presents within a theoretical frame of reference that takes account not only of the rats and beetles in the cellarage, but also of those treasures, birds and angels so largely ignored by Freud and his followers."

Huxley saw Myers as a classical scholar, a minor poet, a conscientious observer, and a platonian philosopher, someone who "was free to pay more attention to the positive aspects of the subliminal self than to its negative and destructive aspects," as with the doctors involved in the study of the subliminal self.

Through his extensive scientific research, Myers original belief in survival of the consciousness at death was restored. "Telepathy, I have said, looks like a law prevailing in the spiritual as well as in the material world," Myers wrote. "And that it does so prevail, I now add, is proved by the fact that those who communicated with us telepathically in this world communicate with us telepathically from the other world."

Lodge and Myers became good friends. In his autobiography, *Past Years*, Lodge states that

Myers had a remarkable interest in science and a portentous memory. He knew the *Æneid* by heart and could recite many of the *Bab Ballads* without difficulty. Lodge recalled attending one of Myers' lectures on the poet Crabbe, calling it a remarkable *tour de force*. "He had no notes," Sir Oliver wrote, "but after speaking of Crabbe and his poetry in unexpectedly eulogistic terms, he recited from memory whole reams of Crabbe's poetry, which I had never heard before, and was ignorant of."

It was Myers, Lodge explained, that broke down his skepticism and showed him the reasonableness of the survival hypothesis. "He it was who put evidence in my way such as gradually convinced me of the truth of the doctrine."

Lodge further wrote that he sometimes questioned a career decision he had made many years earlier, but then he would remind himself that had he not made that decision he might not have crossed paths with Myers. Thus, he was certain he had made the right decision.

While visiting the United States, Myers took time out to swim the Niagara River, just below the falls. According to Dr. Eddy, Myers gave some thought to the possibility of dying during that somewhat risky swim, but, no longer fearing death, he undertook the swim as a "joyous adventure."

University of Geneva psychology professor Theodor Flournoy opined that Myers name should be joined to those of Copernicus and Darwin, completing "the triad of geniuses" who have most profoundly revolutionized scientific thought.

"If Myers was not a mystic, he had all the faith of a mystic and the ardour of an apostle, in conjunction with the sagacity and precision of a savant," wrote Dr. Charles Richet, the 1913 Nobel Prize winner in medicine.

Myers' interest in the subject apparently continued on after his death in 1901, as he is credited with giving us perhaps the strongest evidence yet obtained for survival in the "cross correspondence" cases. In those famous cases, Myers is said to have provided fragments of information

through four mediums in separate parts of the world – fragment which seemed meaningless and incoherent until pieced together.

In his book, *On the Threshold of the Unseen*, Sir William Barrett recalled an afterlife communication from Myers in which part of Myers' poem, *St. Paul*, came through the automatic writing of "Mrs. Holland," who later told Barrett that she had never before read the poem and knew nothing of it. While recognizing that Mrs. Holland could have read it before and stored it away in her subconscious, Barrett wrote that all of the communication through Mrs. Holland was very characteristic of Myers.

Barrett quotes Myers in another afterlife communication through Mrs. Holland: "To believe that the mere act of death enables a spirit to understand the whole mystery of death is as absurd as to imagine that the act of birth enables an infant to understand the whole mystery of life. I am still groping, surmising, conjecturing. The experience is different for each one of us...One was here lately who could not believe he was dead; he accepted the new condition as a certain state in the treatment of his illness."

In a later writing through Mrs. Holland, Myers gave this message: "The reality is infinitely more wonderful than our most daring conjectures. Indeed, no conjecture is sufficiently daring."



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