

Biography of Walter Franklin Prince (1863-1934)

The only American, other than William James, to occupy the position of president of the Society for Psychical Research (London), Dr. Walter Franklin Prince is most remembered today for his work in abnormal psychology, particularly the Doris Fischer case of multiple personality, and the strange case of Patience Worth. He was the author of *The Psychic in the House* (1926), *The Case of Patience Worth* (1927), *Noted Witnesses for Psychic Occurrences* (1928) and *Enchanted Boundary* (1930).



Born in Detroit, Maine, Prince received his A.B. (1896) and Ph.D. (1898) at Yale University. In between those two degrees, he received a B.D. from Drew Theological Seminary (1897) and for a number of years held pastorates in churches in Maine, Connecticut, New York, Pennsylvania, and California. His last church post was a director of psychotherapeutics at St. Mark's Episcopal Church in New York City. He left that position in 1917 to become assistant to Dr. James H. Hyslop at the American Society for Psychical Research (ASPR). Prince succeeded Hyslop as head of the organization after Hyslop's death in 1920. In 1925, he became one of the founders of the Boston Society for

Psychic Research and was elected its Executive Research Officer and Editor, a position he held until his death. He served as president of the SPR in London during 1930-31.

Beginning in 1913, an entity calling herself Patience Worth began communicating through Pearl Curran, a St. Louis, Missouri housewife, who had no prior experience in mediumship. Over the next 24 years, until Curran's death in 1937, Patience Worth produced approximately four million words, including seven books, some short stories, several plays, thousands of poems, and countless epigrams and aphorisms. She would be acclaimed a literary genius – her works compared with Shakespeare, Chaucer, and Spenser. She was called a wit, a poet, a dramatist, and a philosopher.

Patience Worth claimed to be the spirit of a woman born in Dorsetshire, England during the 17th Century. She said she migrated to America where she was killed by American Indians. Before Prince began studying Mrs. Curran's mediumship in 1924, other scholars and scientists had observed her. Some of them rejected the spiritistic hypothesis and claimed that the information had to be coming from her subconscious and that it was a case of multiple personalities. However, Curran's limited education (elementary school only) and travel were totally inconsistent with theories of conscious fraud or subconscious memories. Moreover, English scholars struggled with some of the archaic Anglo-Saxon language in her prose and poetry and were certain that Mrs. Curran could not have researched many of the words.

In ending his 509-page 1927 book about the Patience Worth phenomenon, Prince wrote: "Either our concept of what we call the subconscious must be radically altered, so as to include potencies

of which we hitherto have had no knowledge, or else some cause operating through but not originating in the subconsciousness of Mrs. Curran must be acknowledged.”¹

Prince had devoted 10 months to studying Mrs. Curran. “No single discovered datum has been omitted, no clue or hint from any source neglected,” he stated. “It is not possible for any fact that shall come to light to disconcert me, since I am not wedded to any theory.”²

Before his investigation of Pearl Curran, Prince was involved in the famous Doris Fischer case, one of the first cases of multiple personality subject to scientific study. His report on the case was 1,332 pages long and he more or less straddled the fence between multiple personalities and spirit possession, the latter diagnosis favored by Professor Hyslop. Prince concluded that a spiritistic element was present in Doris’s life, but wasn’t sure that it was the primary cause of her problems. He felt that science had given a much too limited meaning to the “subliminal self” and was using it “as a mere cloak for our ignorance whenever we are confronted by the inexplicable events with which we have to attempt to grapple.”³

In the Introduction to Prince’s book, *Noted Witnesses for Psychic Occurrences*, which set forth short stories and testimonies to the reality of psychic phenomena by some 170 distinguished men and women, Dr. Gardner Murphy, a psychologist and president of the American Society for Psychical Research, wrote: “It may not be apparent at first what a formidable apparatus of knowledge and experience was applied by Dr. Prince to the selection of these cases. Long before he made the selection, he had become one of the most renowned (and feared) investigators of mediums not only in America but in Europe as well. His was a leading role in establishing scientific standards and methods for control of mediums and analysis of their results. He was a skillful magician by professional standards, and used this knowledge to expose fraudulent mediums. But his negative conclusions

and experiences did not leave him the less open-minded to any new possibility.”⁴

Prince was one of a number of researchers who investigated the controversial mediumship of Mina “Margery” Crandon of Boston, a case that would severely divide the American Society for Psychical Research. In his report of August 29, 1924, Prince stated that he had six sittings with Margery. In five of the sittings he was one of the immediate controllers, i.e., holding her hand, and in the sixth he was too far away from her to form an independent judgment. In three of the sittings, there were physical phenomena produced, but Prince did not see it as being outside the scope of “normal explanation,” except for one striking detail in the sitting in which he was too far away to judge. There was nothing produced in the other three sittings. “I am compelled to render an opinion that thus far the experiments have not scientifically and conclusively proved the exercise of supernormal powers,” he concluded his report.⁵

However, Prince validated the mediumship of others, including Minnie Meserve Soule (“Mrs. Chenoweth”) and Gladys Osborne Leonard. In the sittings he and his daughter, Theodosia, had with Mrs. Chenoweth during 1925, Prince recognized that some of the facts communicated were in their minds but many were fading images and far overshadowed by more dynamic memories. “Nothing that we know or think we know of telepathy would lead us to suppose that it acts otherwise than after the analogy of a mechanical force, gives ground to suppose that it dramatizes, intelligently adopts the viewpoint of a third person, and selects to suit the characteristics of that person,” he wrote in ruling out telepathy as an explanation.⁶

In his 1930 book, Prince took on those hostile to psychical research and attempted to explain why there was so much negativity associated with the field. “The *zeitgeist*, particularly in America, is at present unfavorable to psychic facts, and for many the vane is set, from childhood, against liking them,” he explained in the Preface of the book.

“In some cases the dislike is so great that it prevents one from making any understanding examination of the evidence and at the same time betrays him into making declarations based on manifold misapprehensions.”⁷

Prince examined every conceivable argument made against credible mediums by noted scientists and scholars and then dissected the arguments, suggesting that they were made out of unfamiliarity with the phenomena, ignorance, bias, or closed-minds. “Undoubtedly a multitude of intelligent men and women have been mightily impressed by the spectacle of the larger group of scholars who have denied and deny the validity of the facts themselves, and principally on this ground favor opposition,” he further wrote. “Although the most which they have seen from the pens of the learned skeptics has amounted to little more than *ex cathedra* ducts or contemptuous ejaculations, they suppose that the authors, had they taken the trouble, could have justified the expressions overwhelmingly. Or, if they have read what

purports to be an argument in refutation of evidence offered, they have trusted in surface appearance of effectiveness, not thinking it necessary to ascertain whether the Case Reports have been met squarely and analyzed fairly, or have been garbled, nibbled about the edges, and treated with an evasion, sophistry and persiflage which would be deemed unworthy in any other field of discussion.”⁸

In effect, Prince felt that many highly-esteemed scholars, unqualified to judge one way or the other in psychic matters, were rushing willy-nilly to save the public from “superstition,” while the public, not realizing that the scholar’s area of expertise did not carry over to psychical research, was too often inclined to accept the verdicts of these nay-sayers.



Copyright 2011 Michael E. Tymn

¹ Prince, Walter Franklin, *The Case of Patience Worth*, University Press, 1964, p. 509.

² _____.

³ _____, p. 508.

⁴ Prince, Walter Franklin, *Noted Witnesses for Psychic Occurrences*, University Books, 1963, Intro pp. v-vi.

⁵ Tietze, Thomas R., *Margery*, Harper & Row, 1973. p. 57.

⁶ Allison, Lydia W. *Leonard and Soule Experiments in Psychical Research*, Boston Society for Psychic Research, 1929, p. 203.

⁷ Prince, Walter Franklin, *The Enchanted Boundary*, Boston Society for Psychic Research, 1930. p. ix.

⁸ _____, p. viii.