

Biography of Edmund Gurney (1847-1888)

A Fellow of Trinity College, Cambridge, Edmund Gurney, M.A. (March 23, 1847 to June 23, 1888) was one of the founders, along with Professors William Barrett and Henry Sidgwick and fellow Cambridge scholar Frederic W. H. Myers, of the Society for Psychical Research (SPR) in London during 1882. His primary contribution to the field was the 1886 book *Phantasms of the Living*, one of the classics of psychical research.

Although co-authored with Myers and Frank Podmore, Gurney was, as stated in the Preface, the principal author of the 1,300-page work (later abridged to 520 pages) that dealt primarily with crisis apparitions and telepathy. "The whole subject of psychical influences has been mixed up in the public mind with ideas of the supernatural or uncanny – with nervous thrills and spurious excitements," Gurney wrote in the Conclusion of the book. "When such associations are carefully excluded, the details of the inquiry cannot be expected to have *more*, and may perhaps have not much *less*, attraction than those of the recognized physical sciences. And so far as the unexciting character of the present collection – poor in thrills, but tolerably rich in verified data – tends to make this sober view prevail, it will be a direct advantage. For exactly like the physical sciences, the research has to go on, methodically, not sensationally; and it has only just begun to be methodized."¹

Like Myers, his good friend, Gurney was a victim of the wave of materialism that swept over the educated world during the late 19th Century. Unable to reconcile Darwinism with a spiritual universe, people began to see life as a march toward extinction, nothing more. When three of his sisters drowned in a boating accident on the Nile River, Gurney's hopelessness turned to complete

despair. "Life lived as a cog in a cold, godless, indifferent machine...had come to seem to him unbearable," author Deborah Blum surmises from her research of Gurney.²



Educated primarily as a musician with the intent of becoming a concert pianist, Gurney authored *The Power of Sound*, a book for musicians. However, he apparently did not feel cut out for a career in music and continued his studies at Cambridge in both law and medicine. Having inherited a large sum of money, he apparently had no real need to rush into a career. He met Myers at Cambridge while studying law and bonded with him over their mutual love of poetry, especially that of Tennyson. They also enjoyed discussing philosophy.

Having read of Alfred Russel Wallace's arguments for a spiritual world and of William Crookes' experiments with mediums D.D. Home and Florence Cook, Gurney was inspired to search for additional evidence supporting something

more than a material world. Telepathy was viewed by him and Myers as a first step in that direction. On May 9, 1874, Gurney and Myers met William Stainton Moses, an Anglican minister who had developed mediumistic abilities. "That evening was epoch-making in Gurney's life and mine," Myers wrote. "Standing as we were in the attitude natural at the commencement of such inquiries, under such conditions as were then attainable, an attitude of curiosity tempered by a vivid perception of difficulty and drawback, we now met a man of university education, of manifest sanity and probity, who vouched to us for a series of phenomena – occurring to himself, and with no doubtful or vernal aid – which seemed at least to prove, in confusedly intermingled form, three main theses unknown to science. These were (1) the existence in the human spirit of hidden powers of insight and of communication; (2) the personal survival and near presence of the departed; and (3) interference, due to unknown agencies, with the ponderable world."³

Barrett, a professor of physics, was the prime mover in organizing the SPR, which initially was "to enquire into the phenomena associated with Spiritualism." He was urged on by Stainton Moses, possibly the most influential Spiritualist of the day. Because it appeared that the new organization would be overly influenced by Spiritualists, Myers, Gurney and Sidgwick were initially reluctant to participate, feeling that scientific integrity would be compromised. But they were eventually persuaded by Barrett to lead the organization. "However, despite initial good will, the early years of the SPR were characterized not just by painful clashes of personality and class but also by conflicts over both the methods and areas of investigation," historian Trevor Hamilton explains, adding that "Myers and Gurney threw themselves with great drive and enthusiasm into the work of [various] committees." They soon supplanted Barrett in power and Stainton Moses resigned from the organization in 1886 because he felt that the methods

were too strict and not suited for spiritual phenomena.⁴

Gurney devoted some three years to gathering material for and writing *Phantasms of the Living*. When finished with that project, his interest turned to the psychological side of hypnotism, a subject on which he wrote extensively and in which he became recognized as an authority.

At 41, Gurney died from an apparently self-administered overdose of chloroform. Whether it was an accidental overdose or suicide was never determined. The position of the SPR was that it was accidental. After his death, messages started coming through several mediums from Gurney. On December 21, 1889, Professor Oliver Lodge, a distinguished British physicist, was studying the medium Leonora Piper when a spirit claiming to be Gurney began communicating. Dr. Phinuit, Piper's spirit control, told Lodge that "Edmund sends his love." Then, the personality possessing Piper seemed to change and Gurney began speaking. "I am here, I etherically exist," Gurney told Lodge. "I wrote to you about some books for the Society. I have seen a little woman that's a medium, a true medium. I have written to Myers using her hand. I did do it, I, Edmund Gurney, I."⁵

Lodge questioned Gurney about both Piper and Phinuit. Gurney told him that Piper was a true medium. As for Phinuit, he said, "He is not all one would wish, but he is all right." Gurney further told Lodge: "There is no death, only a shadow and then Light. Experiment and observations are indispensable. We have to use some method like this to communicate."⁶

At a sitting four days later, Lodge recorded that Phinuit seemed to leave as Gurney again took over in a more educated voice. Lodge noted that the changeover took place with some uncertainty and difficulty and he could hear Phinuit giving *sotto voce* (whispered) instructions to Gurney before Gurney began speaking.

"There is an infinite power above us," Gurney communicated. "Lodge, believe it fully, infinite over all, most marvelous."⁷ Gurney further

told Lodge that when he “passed out” he was confused and didn’t know who he was or where he was. “I hunted about for my friends and for my body. Soon however my sister welcomed me. Three of them, all drowned.”⁸

In another sitting, Lodge’s wife, Mary, was present and when Lodge introduced her, the entranced Mrs. Piper reached out to greet her, Gurney continuing to speak and mentioning that he had tea with her once. Telepathy aside, this was evidential as he did have tea with her on one occasion and it was highly unlikely that Mrs. Piper knew of this.

¹ Gurney, Edmund, *Phantasms of the Living*, E. P. Dutton and Co., 1918, p. 519.

² Blum, Deborah, *Ghost Hunters*, The Penguin Press, 2006, p. 56.

³ Myers, F.W.H., *Human Personality and its Survival of Bodily Death*, University Books, Inc, 1961 (reprint of 1903 book) p. 371.



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Notes

⁴ Hamilton, Trevor, *Immortal Longings*, Imprint-Academic, 2009, pp. 113-114.

⁵ Holt, Henry, *On the Cosmic Relations*, Houghton Mifflin Company, 1914, p. 432.

⁶ _____, p. 433.

⁷ _____, p. 434.

⁸ _____, p. 434.