

Biography of Richard Hodgson (1855-1905)

Dr. Richard Hodgson is believed to have been the first full-time, paid psychical researcher. During some 20 years of research, Hodgson moved from skeptic and debunker to a believer in psychic phenomena and survival.

Born in Melbourne, Australia and raised a Methodist, Hodgson earned his B.A. (1874), LL.B (1875), M.A. (1876) and LL.D (1878) at the University of Melbourne. He then moved to England, entering the University of Cambridge as a scholar of St. John's College while studying Moral Sciences. He apparently chose St. John's because William Wordsworth, whose works he admired, had attended the school.



After taking honors in 1881, he began teaching poetry and philosophy at University Extension. In 1884, he accepted a position at Cambridge as lecturer on the philosophy of Herbert Spencer. However, according to Alex Baird, Hodgson's biographer, Hodgson "imbibed enough of an

idealistic philosophy to eliminate the materialistic tendencies of Spenser." Baird adds that Hodgson was too strong an individualist to follow any philosopher completely, as "unconsciously he was searching for the Source and Secret of All Life."¹

Hodgson was such an individualist and non-conformist that he refused to accept his degree at the Cambridge ceremony in 1881 because it involved kneeling before the vice-chancellor. He said he would kneel to no man. Moreover, while black was the customary evening dress at Cambridge, Hodgson insisted on wearing an eccentric brown suit.

While attending Cambridge, Hodgson joined an organization called the Cambridge Society for Psychical Research, which was started in 1879 and was a forerunner of the Society for Psychical Research (SPR). He took an active part in the Society, exposing several fraudulent mediums. When the SPR was formed in 1882, Hodgson became one of its first members. While lecturing on Spenser at Cambridge, he was asked by the SPR to travel to India to investigate the Theosophical Society and its leaders, including Madame H. P. Blavatsky. After more than four months in India, Hodgson concluded that Blavatsky was a charlatan. A bitter controversy resulted from this, the Theosophists claiming that Hodgson did not understand the physical phenomena resulting from Blavatsky's mediumship and was too harsh in his judgment. Upon returning to England Hodgson investigated several other physical mediums and issued a report that "nearly all the professional mediums are a gang of vulgar tricksters who are more or less in league with one another."²

In 1887, Hodgson moved to Boston to become executive secretary of the American branch of the SPR (ASPR) and to take over from William

James the investigation of Leonora Piper. "During the first few years, I absolutely disbelieved in her power," Hodgson wrote some 12 years into his 18-year investigation of Piper. "I had but one object, to discover fraud and trickery ... of unmasking her. Today, I am prepared to say that I believe in the possibility of receiving messages from what is called the world of spirits. I entered the house profoundly materialistic, not believing in the continuance of life after death; today I say I believe. The truth has been given to me in such a way as to remove from me the possibility of a doubt."³

As the only full-time employee of the ASPR, Hodgson had hundreds of sittings with Piper between 1887 and his death in 1905, usually sitting with her three times a week. Initially, he subscribed to the secondary personality hypothesis. That is, Phinuit (Piper's spirit control during the early years) was nothing more than a fragmented personality buried away in her subconscious. Somehow this fragmented personality was able to read minds and communicate information that seemed to be coming from discarnate souls.

But Hodgson's attitude began to change in 1892, following the death of George Pellew, an associate of the ASPR. A member of a prominent New York family and a Harvard graduate with a law degree, Pellew (given the pseudonym "George Pelham" for the research records) was a writer and poet. He authored at least six books, including biographies of statesmen John Jay and Henry Ad-dington and one on poetry. In February 1892, at the age of 32, Pellew died from injuries suffered in a fall from a horse.

The communication with Pellew caused Hodgson to abandon all other theories in favor of the spirit hypothesis. While the existence of Phinuit could not be verified, there was no doubt that Pellew had lived in the flesh. Moreover, there was too much individuality, too much purpose and persistence, expressed by Pellew to attribute it to telepathy of a limited or expanded nature. It was one thing, Hodgson reasoned, for a medium to tap

into another mind or cosmic reservoir for information, quite another for that other mind or reservoir to come back with the fullness of a personality rather than just fragmentary bits of information.

"At the present time I cannot profess to have any doubt but that the chief communicators...are veritably the personages they claim to be, that they have survived the change we call death, and that they have directly communicated with us, whom we call living, through Mrs. Piper's organism," Hodgson concluded.⁴

Rejected by an early love in Australia, Hodgson never married. He lived the last 20 years of his life in a small Boston apartment, taking most of his meals at the nearby Tavern Club after spending long hours in his one-person office at 5 Boylston Place. While he devoted an average three days a week to studying Mrs. Piper, he investigated many other cases, including that of the "Watseka Wonder," which he concluded belonged in the spiritistic category. According to Henry James, the son of William James, Hodgson buried himself in his Charles Street apartment for work and reading that went into the small hours.

Hodgson often joined the James family at their retreat in Chocorua, New Hampshire. Henry James recalled that his father hated fishing, so Hodgson taught him and his brothers how to fish. He also swam with them, played hide-and-seek with them, and amused them with sleight-of-hand tricks. Having the stereotype of an Australian as a frontiersman and bushranger, young James remembered wondering if Hodgson was a typical Australian. "Outwardly, Hodgson didn't look in the least like a student or scholar," James mused. "He was muscular, very light on his feet, had a very sharp eye which seemed to be noticing everything, and a serene, untroubled countenance." James also remembered Hodgson as sometimes humming a tune, sometimes quoting poetry, and often reading.⁵

Hereward Carrington, another psychical researcher and Hodgson's close friend, wrote that during the latter years of his life Hodgson would

allow no one to enter the privacy of his small apartment as he was concerned that it would upset the "magnetic atmosphere." According to Carrington, Hodgson began receiving direct communications from Imperator and Rector, the spirit controls who succeeded Phinuit and Pellew and were apparently from a much higher realm than their predecessors. Hodgson kept these communications a secret because he feared it would affect his standing as an objective researcher.

In a letter to a friend, Hodgson wrote: "It adds a great deal to life, of course, to be assured of the nearness and help of particular discarnate spirits, but, apart from this, there is no necessity for anyone who believes in God doubting the absolute persistence of the moral order throughout the whole of existence."⁶

Eight days after Hodgson's death, Miss Theodate Pope, who had known Hodgson, was having a sitting with Mrs. Piper. Rector, Piper's spirit control, was using her organism and writing something when the hand dropped the pencil and started shaking. When the hand steadied itself, it wrote the letter "H," after which the point of the pencil was broken. When a new pencil was placed in Piper's hand, it wrote "Hodgson." It started to write something else, but only rapid scrawls followed.

Rector then took back control of the medium and explained that Hodgson was there, but that he was too "choked" to write. It wasn't until another sitting by Pope five days later that Hodgson communicated again, beginning with a poem. However, he added that he felt confused and could write no more. At a third sitting, on January 8, 1906, Hodgson came again and explained that it was extremely difficult for him to communicate, suggesting that he had not yet awakened enough or that he had not yet learned how to handle the "mechanism" (Piper's body).

On January 23, 1906, Mrs. William James, wife of the renowned Harvard professor, and William James, Jr. sat with Piper. Hodgson used Piper's voice mechanism and said: "Why, there's

Billy! Is that Mrs. James and Billy? God bless you! Well, well, this is good! [laughs] I have found my way, I am here, have patience with me...Where's William?...I am not strong, but have patience with me...I will tell you all..."⁷

Hodgson went on to say that he had seen (Frederic) Myers (pioneering psychical researcher who died in 1901) and wanted (Sir Oliver) Lodge (another psychical researcher, still alive) to know everything. He asked James Jr. about his swimming and fishing, two activities they had enjoyed together. He also asked James Jr. if he could give George Dorr (who has handling his affairs) some instructions about his (Hodgson's) private papers. There was much other evidential information indicating that it was indeed Hodgson communicating. Hodgson closed with a comment that communication was much more difficult than he had anticipated while alive and that he now understood why Myers communicated so little.

As the American branch of the SPR was often short of funds, Hodgson did not always receive his full salary. A wealthy friend sometimes donated money to make up the deficit. However, it was donated through one of the ASPR officers with the understanding that Hodgson not know where the money came from, as the friend did not want Hodgson to in any way feel obligated to him. When that friend had a sitting with Piper, Hodgson communicated and thanked him for his support.

Over the next seven or eight months, many people who had known Hodgson had sittings with Piper. The discarnate Hodgson did his best to provide bits of information that would allow them to recognize that he was communicating, and that it was not all some mind-reading game. But as communicating spirits had indicated to Hodgson when he was alive and sitting with Piper, it is not all that easy to get information through. The discarnate Hodgson said that it was very difficult to remember names and that some earthly memories come and go. Even when he was alive, he was poor with names and recollections. The fact that he was now

operating in a different realm did not mean that he could remember them any better. Moreover, there were difficulties in communicating various things through the medium's organism.

"I find now difficulties such as a blind man would experience in trying to find his hat," Hodgson told Professor William Newbold in a July 23, 1906 sitting. "And I am not wholly conscious of my own utterances because they come out automatically, impressed upon the machine (Piper's body). ... I impress my thoughts on the machine which registers them at random, and which are at times doubtless difficult to understand. I understand so much better the *modus operandi* than I did when I was in your world."⁸

When Newbold asked Hodgson if he could see him, Hodgson replied that he could but that he could feel his presence better. He added that he stood behind Newbold and William James as they were discussing him (Hodgson) the prior week and could hear their conversation. He recalled James saying that he (Hodgson) was very "secretive and careful." Newbold said he did not recall that comment. "I tell you, Billy, he said so," Hodgson exclaimed.⁹ James later confirmed that he did make such a statement.

When Dr. James Hyslop, another renowned psychical researcher of that era, sat with Piper, Hodgson asked him if he remembered a conversation when he (Hodgson) said that if he died first and were able to communicate he would talk with the fervor of a southern preacher. Hyslop said he did not remember any such conversation. Hodgson then recalled that it was William James with whom he had had the conversation. Hyslop later contacted James to see if such a statement had been made. James confirmed it, although his recollection was that he made the statement to Hodgson.

Except for the vocal greeting to Mrs. James and her son, the communication from Hodgson came through Piper's hand in writing. Rector would often relay the messages from Hodgson, but there were times when Hodgson took control himself. James asked Hodgson why it was necessary for Rector to assist him in the communication so often. Hodgson explained that Rector better understands the "management of the light."

When James chided Hodgson on his handwriting, commenting that it was getting worse, Hodgson asked James if he recalled a time that he (Hodgson) wrote to him in London, but James found his handwriting so "detestable" that he had to ask his daughter, Margaret, to read it. James could not clearly remember it, but his daughter remembered it perfectly.

According to James, who had a number of sittings with Piper when Hodgson communicated, there was a lively feeling that the personality communicating, whether Rector or Hodgson, understood the whole situation. "If you can give up to it, William, and feel the influence of it and the reality of it, it will take away the sting of death," Hodgson advised James concerning his skepticism, adding that James expected too much from him, as if he should be able to communicate as effectively and coherently as he could in the body.¹⁰

"It is a tribute to the scientific cautiousness and thoroughness of [Hodgson]," Hyslop wrote, "that he so long persisted in the suspense of judgment that carried him through seven or eight years more investigation before he would allow himself to confess his belief in the scientific evidence for a future life."¹¹



¹ Baird, Alex, *The Life of Richard Hodgson*, Psychic Press Limited, 1949, p. 4

² _____, p. 26

³ Tweedale, Charles, *Man's Survival After Death*, The Psychic Book Club, 1909, p. 470

⁴ Baird, p. 85

⁵ _____, p. 282

⁶ _____, p. 296

⁷ Holt, Henry, *On the Cosmic Relations*, Houghton, Mifflin Company, p. 696

⁸ _____, p. 720

⁹ _____, p. 722

¹⁰ _____, p. 727

¹¹ Baird, p. 299