

Biography of James H. Hyslop (1854-1920)

Dr. James Hervey Hyslop was a professor of logic and ethics at Columbia University before becoming a full-time psychical researcher in 1902. In 1904, he organized the American Institute for Scientific Research, which was to be devoted to the study of abnormal psychology and psychical research. When Dr. Richard Hodgson, who headed the American branch of the Society for Psychical Research (ASPR), died in 1905, the ASPR became a section of Hyslop's organization and Hyslop dropped the study of abnormal psychology from his objectives. Although initially skeptical, Hyslop came to believe in spirit communication and the survival of consciousness at death.

Born in Xenia, Ohio, Hyslop earned his B.A. at Wooster College in Ohio, then studied at the University of Leipzig for two years before receiving his Ph.D. from Johns Hopkins University in 1887 and his LL.D. from University of Wooster. He taught philosophy at Lake Forest University, Smith College, and Bucknell University before joining the faculty of Columbia in 1895. He authored three textbooks, *Elements of Logic* (1892), *Elements of Ethics* (1895), and *Problems of Philosophy* (1905).

Hyslop's interest in psychical research came as a result of his friendship with Harvard professor William James and an 1888 sitting with Leonora Piper, the Boston medium being studied then by James and Hodgson. However, it was a series of sittings with Mrs. Piper in 1898 that fully convinced Hyslop of survival, as many evidential facts were communicated by Hyslop's deceased father. The father mentioned that his son's voice was the last he heard on his deathbed. He asked what happened to his old horse, giving the horse's name, Tom. He said that his old friend, Steele Perry, had moved west. He referred to another

friend, Harper Crawford, being involved in a dispute over putting an organ in their church. All were confirmed as factual and the latter two facts were outside the scope of mental telepathy as Hyslop knew nothing about them at the time. He later checked with relatives and found them to be true.



Hyslop continued to sit with Piper periodically over several years. There was much more in the way of evidence coming to him from deceased relatives. At one sitting, his uncle, James McClellan, communicated and mentioned that Hyslop was named after him, which Hyslop confirmed as correct. The uncle also said that he "despised the (nick) name Jim," which Hyslop knew nothing about. However, when Hyslop checked with his cousin, one of the uncle's daughters, he was informed that his uncle did, in fact, dislike being called Jim.

Hyslop concluded that fraud was not a possibility. Even if Piper knew he was coming to sit

with her, which she didn't, she would have had to employ a private investigator to dig up obscure facts in a town nearly a thousand miles from where she lived, this at a time when travel and communications were slow and relatively expensive. And she would have had to assume that none of Hyslop's relatives would mention that a private investigator was there asking about the names of horses, nicknames, church disputes, etc. And the investigator would have had to somehow have found out about private conversations Hyslop had with his father, which were also mentioned.

The fact that information unknown to Hyslop but later verified as true was communicated seemed to rule out simple person to person telepathy. As for a more cosmic telepathy – one in which the medium taps into minds and memories anywhere in the world or in some cosmic computer and then relays the information back to the sitter in a conversational manner – Hyslop felt that there was no adequate scientific evidence for such a theory and that it represented a process far more incredible than spirits.

Hyslop saw three positive arguments for the spiritistic hypothesis: 1) the selective unity of consciousness exhibited; 2) the dramatic display of personality, and 3) the character of the mistakes and confusion. In connection with the latter, he opined that “on the telepathic hypothesis there is no reason for expecting any characteristics in the ‘communications’ that suggests defects of memory.

He continued studying Mrs. Piper after Hodgson's death while also studying a number of other prominent American mediums, primarily Minnie Meserve Soule, who was given the pseudonym “Mrs. Chenoweth,” and Mrs. Willis M. Cleaveland, who went under the pseudonym “Mrs. Smead.”

During January 1907, Frederic L. Thompson, a New York City goldsmith, consulted Hyslop, claiming that visions and hallucinations were threatening his sanity. He explained that he

was “suddenly and inexplicably seized with an impulse to sketch and paint pictures.”¹ Prior to that, he had no real interest or experience in art beyond the engraving required in his occupation. The visions or hallucinations involved trees and landscapes and were accompanied by a feeling that a man named Robert Swain Gifford, an artist he had met a few years earlier, was talking to him and inducing him to paint pictures. One vision of some gnarled oak trees especially haunted him and he felt he had to find the scene and paint it. It was at this point that he contacted Hyslop. He sketched the gnarled oak trees for Hyslop, stressing that the need to find the trees and paint them was overwhelming him and causing him to lose interest in his job.

Since Hyslop had been studying mediumistic phenomena, he arranged to have Thompson sit with three mediums, “Mrs. Rathbun, “Mrs. Chenoweth,” and “Mrs. Smead.” All three sittings provided evidential information suggesting that Gifford was influencing Thompson. In the Chenoweth sitting, some 20 bits of information were mentioned to suggest that Gifford was communicating, including a reference to his fondness for rugs and rich and flesh colors, to a tarpaulin which he frequently wore, to his sudden death, his unfinished work, to the condition of his studio, to misty scenes, and finally to a group of oak trees. Finally, Thompson was directed to one of the Elizabeth Islands off Massachusetts, where Thompson and Hyslop found the gnarled oak tree scene along with Gifford's initials, R.S.G., carved in one of the trees.

“Superficially, at least, all the facts point to the spiritistic hypothesis, whatever perplexities exist in regard to the *modus operandi* of the agencies effecting the result,” Hyslop ended his report of the case.²

While Hyslop was still teaching at Columbia, James Cattell, a fellow professor, sneered at Hyslop's interest in psychical research. When Hyslop published articles that strongly supported non-mechanistic theories, Cattell tried to have him

fired. In his defense, Hyslop, noting scientific efforts to find a species of useless fish to support Darwin's theory, asked "why it is so noble and respectable to find whence man came, and so suspicious and dishonorable to ask and ascertain whither he goes?"³

He later wrote: "The academic world is blind to the needs of the hour and has isolated itself as in aristocratic seclusion from contact with the life of those who are ruling the tendencies of the future. It is left, as it apparently has always been, to the outside world to find leaven for the regeneration, and if any spiritual ideal be discovered it must be in the little beacon lights that shine out from the residual and neglected phenomena of mind which promise as wide an extension in psychological knowledge as the new discoveries in the material world have produced in physical science."⁴

Hyslop moved from skeptic to scientific observer to propagandist. He was not one to sit safely on the fence. "Personally I regard the fact of survival after death as scientifically proved," he wrote. "I agree that this opinion is not upheld in scientific quarters. But this is neither our fault nor the fault of the facts. Evolution was not believed until long after it was proved. The fault lay with those who were too ignorant or too stubborn to accept the facts. History shows that every intelligent man who has gone into this investigation, if he gave it adequate examination at all, has come out believing in spirits; this circumstance places the burden of proof on the shoulders of the skeptic."⁵

One of the more interesting cases investigated by Hyslop was that of "Doris," an apparent case of multiple personalities. He came to the conclusion that it was a case of spirit obsession. "What

the doctrine involves is a reinterpretation of secondary and multiple personality," he wrote. "It does not set the doctrine aside, as most critics will be disposed to think. Obsession is simply superimposed upon secondary personality or dissociation, or interfused with it, but it is not necessarily substituted for it."⁶

Hyslop's books on psychical research include *Science and a Future Life* (1905), *Enigmas of Psychic Research* (1906), *Borderland of Psychic Research* (1906), *Psychic Research and the Resurrection* (1908), *Psychic Research and Survival* (1913), *Life After Death* (1918) and *Contact with the Other World* (1919).

Following his death in 1920, Hyslop purportedly began communicating through a number of different mediums. The evidence was gathered by Gertrude O. Tubby, who had served Hyslop as Secretary of the ASPR for many years. She compiled her research in a 1929 book titled *James H. Hyslop - X*. "[Hyslop] apparently seized the earliest opportunity; that is, five hours after his death, when Miss Tubby, making an ostensibly casual friendly call on Mrs. C. G. Sanders of New York, was given highly pertinent and evidential information, the medium being uninformed of Dr. Hyslop's death," wrote Weston D. Bayley, M.D. in the preface of the book. "Continuing from then until the present time the same communicator has utilized practically every available opportunity to establish his identity as having survived the destruction of his frail and outworn physical body."⁷

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¹ Hyslop, James, H., *Contact with the Other World*, The Century Co., 1919, p. 203

² _____, p. 230

³ Blum, Deborah, *Ghost Hunters*, The Penguin Press, 2006, p. 247

⁴ Hyslop, James, H., *Psychical Research and The Resurrection*, Small, Maynard and Co., 1908, p. 409

⁵ _____, *Contact*, p. 480

⁶ _____, *Life After Death*, E. P. Dutton & Co., 1918, p. 306

⁷ Tubby, Gertrude Ogden, *James H. Hyslop – X*, The York Printing Co., 1929, Preface