

Biography of William Romaine Newbold (1865-1926)

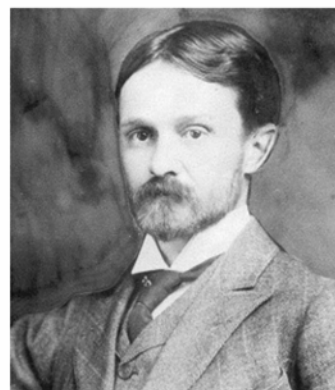
As a member of the American Society for Psychical Research (ASPR), William Romaine Newbold, a University of Pennsylvania professor of philosophy and psychology, carried out considerable research with trance medium Leonora Piper of Boston, Massachusetts. Between 1891 and 1895, he had 26 sittings with her and studied the details of seven others held on his behalf by Dr. Richard Hodgson.

The predominant theory among researchers in 1891, before the emergence of George Pellew (G.P.) as a spirit “control” of Mr. Piper’s, was that Dr. Phinuit, her primary control at the time, was a secondary personality buried in her subconscious and this secondary personality had the ability to tap into the minds of the sitters, even into minds elsewhere, for the information coming out of Mrs. Piper’s mouth, then to somehow dramatize it. In Newbold’s first sitting with Mrs. Piper after the G.P. control manifested in early 1892, his Aunt Sally communicated, but G.P. struggled to understand whether she was his aunt or his grandmother. Newbold understood G.P.’s dilemma perfectly, explaining that his paternal grandfather’s second wife had a sister whom his (Newbold’s) father married many years after his father’s death, that woman being his mother. Thus, Aunt Sally was both his aunt and his step-grandmother.

“The demand made by ‘Aunt Sally’ that I should identify myself by expounding the significance of ‘two marriages in this case, mother and aunt grandma’ ... admits of no satisfactory telepathic explanation,” Newbold offered in his report, wondering why the dim memories of his spinster aunt, who died when he was just 10 years old, were so clearly reflected when so many vivid

memories of others might have been more easily picked up.¹

“Evidence of this sort does not suggest telepathy,” he continued, “it suggests the actual presence of the alleged communicators, and if it stood alone I should have no hesitation in accepting that theory. Unfortunately, it does not stand alone. It is interwoven with obscurity, confusion, irrelevancy, and error in a most bewildering fashion. I agree with Dr. Hodgson that the description given by the (spirit) writers themselves of the conditions under which they are laboring would, if accepted, account for a very large part of this matter. But, even after the most generous allowances on this score, there remains much which the writers cannot explain.”²



Born in Wilmington, Delaware, Newbold received his Ph.D. in 1891 at the University of Pennsylvania and did further graduate study at the University of Berlin. He was on the faculty of the University of Pennsylvania for 37 years, beginning as a Latin instructor and lecturer in philosophy and psychology in 1889, moving up to an assistant professor in philosophy in 1894, professor of philosophy in 1903, and the Albert Seybert Professor of Intellectual and Moral Philosophy

from 1907 until his death. He served as dean of the university's graduate school from 1896 to 1904. His specialty was Greek philosophy, but he also wrote widely on European politics, archaeology, genealogy, and classical and Oriental languages. He even taught Hebrew one year. He received the honorary degree of Doctor of Laws (LL.D) from the University of Pennsylvania in 1921.

In one sitting with Mrs. Piper, Newbold observed G.P. writing while using Mrs. Piper's hand, as Phinuit, who was sharing control duties with G.P. at the time, was talking through her. Newbold heard Phinuit say that he shouldn't be in such a hurry and thought Phinuit was talking to him, thus telling Phinuit that he was in no hurry. Phinuit said he wasn't talking to Newbold but rather to a young man in spirit who was in a great hurry to begin communicating. Hodgson was also there, recording the session. When the young man referred to by Phinuit communicated, he seemed confused, as Mrs. Piper's hand felt Hodgson's head. The young man then said that he did not know Hodgson. Since Mrs. Piper/Dr. Phinuit certainly knew Hodgson, this was deemed not consistent with the secondary personality hypothesis, unless it is claimed that Mrs. Piper was play-acting.

At a June 17, 1895 sitting, Newbold asked G.P. the difference between the writing and talking. G.P. responded that the difference was not apparent to him. "I only know I am writing by having been told so by Hodgson," G.P. wrote through Piper's hand. When Newbold asked G.P. what Phinuit was doing while he was controlling Mrs. Piper, G.P. said that Phinuit was "talking to John H. and a little million others at the same time helping me hold them back and keep them from interrupting me."³

Two days later, Newbold asked G.P. if it was possible to have W. Stainton Moses, an Anglican priest and medium who had died several years earlier, communicate. A short time later,

Phinuit began talking to Newbold, calling him by his nickname, "Billie." The session was recorded:

George (G.P.) is shaking his fingers at me. He sent me after that gentleman (Moses). I found him in another part of our world. [Far away? Newbold asked]. It would be a long way to you Billie but not so far to me. George had difficulty in having him come but they had a long talk and George made it all right with him. He didn't understand what we wished of him. [Newbold asked who it was] I don't know his name. George called me and sent me after him – you understand Billie – said: 'You go and find him for me, doctor.' [Newbold asked how Phinuit knew whom G.P. wanted.] He said, 'I want you to find a friend of mine who used to be a medium in the body,' used the light, you know. Oh he has a great deal of light, more than anybody. [Newbold asked if spirits have lights, too.] What d'you mean Billie? Spirits are all light. [Newbold then asked if some spirits have more light than others.] Yes, indeed. [Newbold asked how he knew whom G.P. wanted.] He described him. [And his influence?] Of course. [Newbold said it was very hard for him to believe in spirits at all and asked Phinuit if he remembered his life on earth.]. Oh yes, but I've been here a very long time. [Newbold asked if Phinuit believed in spirits when he was alive, to which Phinuit gave a derisive laugh.] Not much. Not I.⁴

Newbold concluded his first report by saying he had no theory to offer relative to the origin of the information given. "I can frame none to which I cannot myself allege unanswerable objections."⁵ He noted that the alleged spirits of those who had died a violent death or had been bound to the sitter by emotional ties, would nearly always display great excitement and confusion. He went on to say that the scientific world, which had so tacitly rejected the idea of a supersensible

world and the possibility of occasional communication between that world and this, should reconsider its position based on Mrs. Piper's and kindred cases.

Not long after Hodgson died unexpectedly on December 20, 1905, he began communicating with Professors James, Hyslop and others. Newbold, who had become a good friend of Hodgson's, sat with Mrs. Piper on June 27, and July 3, 1906. George Dorr, another ASPR member and also a good friend of Hodgson's, was present. After Mrs. Piper went into trance, Rector, who had replaced Phinuit and G.P. as Mrs. Piper's control, communicated briefly and turned it over to Hodgson. The SPR script reads, in part and slightly abridged:⁶

Hodgson: "Well, well, of all things! Are you really here! I am Hodgson.

Newbold: "Hallo, Dick!

Hodgson: "Hello, Billy, God bless you.

Newbold: "And you, too, though you do not need to have me say it."

Hodgson: "I wonder if you remember the last talk we had together --"

Newbold: "I do remember it, Dick."

Hodgson: "I can recall very well all I said to you that glorious day when we were watching the waves."

Newbold: "Yes, Dick, I remember it well." (Newbold documented that it was on a splendid afternoon of July 1905 at Nantasket Beach.)

Hodgson: "I told you of many, many predictions which had been made for me. I told you I hoped to realize them but I would not consent to give up my work."

Newbold: "First rate, Dick, you told me just that."

Hodgson: "I would give up almost anything else but my work -- my work and my pipe."

Newbold: "Dick, that sounds like you...Do you remember something I told you on the boat going to Nantasket?"

Hodgson: "Yes, of course. Long ago you wrote me of your happiness and I wrote back and

asked you if you were trying to make me discontented." (This was not what Newbold had in mind, but he confirmed that Hodgson often spoke to him about his happiness.)

Newbold: "I don't remember, but I have your letters and will look it up."

Hodgson: "Look over your letters and you will find my memory better than yours."

Newbold: "Like as not! Like as not!"

Hodgson: "I have hoped to boss things on this side."

Newbold: "Yes, Dick, so you [told me.]

After some further conversation with Newbold, Hodgson began speaking with Dorr. Dorr asked for clarification as to whether Hodgson was communicating directly or Rector was relaying messages from him.

Hodgson: "It is wholly done by Rector and it will continue to be. I shall take no part in that."

Dorr: "Then it is he who is speaking?"

Hodgson: "It is Rector who is speaking and he speaks for me. I have no desire to take Rector's place. I trust him implicitly and absolutely."

Dorr: "And he constantly reports for everyone?"

Hodgson: "Everyone. There is no question about that. In the first place he is more competent to do it, he understands the conditions better than any individual spirit; he is fully capable and is under the constant direction of Emperor..."

On July 3, Newbold and Hodgson again dialogued. After some initial greeting, the transcript reads:

Hodgson: "I am trying my level best to give you facts."

Newbold: "Very good."

Hodgson: "I said my pipe and my work would not be given up even for a wife. Oh how you have helped me, Billy. Yes, in clearing my mind wonderfully. (Newbold noted that Hodgson made a very veridical remark at this point, but he had to omit it for some unexplained reason.) You said you could

not understand why so many mistakes were made, and I talked you blind trying to explain my idea of it.”

Newbold: “Dick, this sounds like your own self. Just the way you used to talk to me.”

Hodgson: “Well if I am not Hodgson, he never lived.”

The dialogue went on for some time, Hodgson telling Newbold that it was much more difficult to communicate than he had anticipated when in the earth life. A number of evidential facts and statements which seemed characteristic of Hodgson were recorded. Of course, since Mrs. Piper had known Hodgson, it was not strong evidence, but Newbold felt like he was communicating with his old friend.

(Note that while G.P. had earlier spelled Newbold's nickname “Billie,” Hodgson/Rector spelled it “Billy.” This is not inconsistent with how they might have spelled it when alive, since it was not Newbold's given name and one or the other might have only guessed as to how it would have been spelled.)

Newbold wrote his impression to James: “The evidence for H's identity, as for that of other communicators, seems to me very strong indeed. It is not absolutely conclusive; but the only alternative theory, the telepathic, seems to me to explain the facts not as well as the spiritistic. I find it, however, absolutely impossible to accept the necessary corollaries of the spiritistic theory, especially those connected with the Emperor group, and therefore am compelled to suspend judgment.”⁷

James noted that the two sittings with Newbold contained less waste matter than other sittings and that two communications omitted for personal reasons would have greatly increased the evidential value.

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¹ Holt, 532 (ASPR Pr. XIV, 34f).

² _____ 533.

³ _____ 590.

⁴ _____ 541-542 (SPR Pr XIV,, 36f).

⁵ _____ 531 (SPR Pr. XIV, 7) .

⁶ _____ 719-723 (SPR Pr. XXIII, 61-78).

⁷ Murphy, 174.