

Biography of George Pellew (1859-1892)

Although a member of the American Society for Psychical Research (ASPR), indications are that George Pellew's membership was more out of philosophical curiosity than participation in the organization's research. However, Pellew contributed significantly to psychical research *after* his death as a control for renowned Boston medium Leonora Piper.



Born in the Isle of Wight, Pellew came to the United States as a boy, at age 12 or 13, following the death of his mother and the remarriage of his father to his mother's sister, an American. His paternal grandfather was George Pellew, Dean of Norwich, England and his father Henry Pellew, one of the founders of Keble College, Oxford. His mother was a granddaughter of John Jay, the first Chief Justice of the United States. He graduated from Harvard University in 1880. While there he served as editor of the *Harvard Advocate* and earned a master's degree with an essay on the Jane Austen novels. He practiced law until 1887, after which he

authored several books, including *Castle and Cabin*, about conditions in Ireland, and biographies of John Jay and Henry Addington, as well as a book of poetry. Before moving to New York City four years before his death, he worked as a correspondent for the *Boston Journal*. At the time of his death, resulting from a fall down a flight of stairs in Manhattan, he was employed as an editorial writer for the *New York Sun*.

Pellew told Dr. Richard Hodgson, the ASPR's Executive Secretary and chief researcher, that he could not conceive of an afterlife but that if he died before Hodgson and found himself "still existing" he would attempt to let Hodgson know.

Hodgson had been studying Mrs. Piper since 1887. He would arrange for various people to anonymously sit with her, and then would observe and record the sessions. The usual procedure was for Mrs. Piper to go into a trance state and her body to be taken over by a spirit control calling himself Dr. Phinuit, who, unlike Mrs. Piper, spoke in a gruff voice and with a French accent. As it came to be understood by Hodgson and other researchers, very few spirits are capable of communicating directly and thus Phinuit would act as a medium on the Other Side, receiving messages from other discarnates and relaying them through Mrs. Piper's vocal cords to those sitting in front of her.

Initially a skeptic, even a debunker, Hodgson had completely ruled out fraud on the part of Mrs. Piper but still questioned whether the voices coming through the young Boston medium in her trance state were voices of the dead or some secondary personality buried in her subconscious. But since many of the sitters seemed to be receiving very evidential information from deceased loved ones and friends, the question remained as to how

the secondary personality, if that is what it was, got the information.

Hodgson, Professor William James of Harvard, and other researchers were reluctant to accept the spirit hypothesis. No evidence could be found that a Dr. Phinuit ever existed and they theorized that he was a secondary personality which was somehow able to telepathically tap into the mind of the sitter. When information came through that was unknown to the sitter but later verified as correct, they further theorized that it was possible for Mrs. Piper's secondary personality to read the mind of anybody in the world, which they called teloteropathy, or to tap into some kind of cosmic reservoir in the ethers and extract information, then feed it back to the sitters. As far fetched as that seemed, any explanation was preferable to spirits, as science, in the wake of Darwinism, was busy demonstrating that things spiritual were just so much superstition and folly. The mere suggestion of spirits of the dead was cause for smirks, scoffs, and sneers among educated people.

Hodgson's confidence in that early view was shaken after Pellew's death. On March 22, 1892, a little over a month after his tragic death, Hodgson brought Pellew's friend John Hart for a sitting with Mrs. Piper. Early in the sitting, Dr. Phinuit (speaking through Mrs. Piper's vocal cords) announced that "George" was there. Phinuit then gave Pellew's full name and the names of several close friends. To give assurance that it was actually himself communicating through Phinuit, Pellew told Hart that the pair of studs he was wearing were once his and were given to Hart by his (Pellew's) parents, which Hart confirmed as true. Pellew then mentioned some mutual friends, Jim and Mary Howard, and asked Hart if he could get them to attend a sitting. He also brought up a discussion he had had with Katharine, the Howard's 15-year-old daughter, about God, space, and eternity. As neither Hart nor Hodgson, who was also in attendance and taking notes, was aware of any such dis-

cussion with Katharine, this information, later confirmed by Katharine, fell outside the scope of simple telepathy.

Hodgson recorded that many personal references were made by Pellew, including one to a book he had not yet finished before his death, and that Hart was impressed, mentioning that various words of greetings and speech mannerisms were very characteristic of Pellew, even though the messages were relayed through Phinuit. For privacy reasons, Hodgson called him George "Pelham" in the research records, or otherwise referred to him simply as "G.P."

Some three weeks later, on April 11, 1892, Jim and Mary Howard had a sitting with Mrs. Piper. They were somewhat reluctant to participate in such "occult activity," but Hart's account of what took place at his sitting made them curious. Hodgson did not tell Mrs. Piper their names or give her any clue as to their connection with Pellew, yet Pellew communicated. Rather than Phinuit speaking through Mrs. Piper and relaying messages from Pellew, however, Pellew took over Mrs. Piper's body and spoke directly to his friends:

Pellew: "Jim, is that you? Speak to me quick. I am not dead. Don't think me dead. I'm awfully glad to see you. Can't you see me? Don't you hear me? Give my love to my father and tell him I want to see him. I am happy here, and more so since I can communicate with you. I pity those people who can't speak..."

Jim Howard: "What do you do George, where you are?"

Pellew: "I am scarcely able to do anything yet; I am just awakened to the reality of life after death. It was like darkness. I could not distinguish anything at first. Darkest hours just before dawn, you know that, Jim. I was puzzled, confused. Shall have an occupation soon. Now I can see you, my friends. I can hear you speak. Your voice, Jim, I can distinguish with your accent and articulation, but it sounds like a big bass drum. Mine would sound to you like the faintest whisper."

Jim Howard: "Our conversation, then, is something like telephoning?"

Pellew: "Yes."

Jim Howard: "By long distance telephone?"

Pellew: (Laughs)

Jim Howard: "Were you not surprised to find yourself living?"

Pellew: "Greatly surprised. I did not believe in a future life. It was beyond my reasoning powers. Now it is as clear to me as daylight. We have an astral facsimile of the material body..."¹

The conversation continued with Pellew mentioning that he had seen and talked with Martha Rogers, the deceased daughter of a mutual friend. He said that she was still adjusting to her new environment. He also asked how Orenberg and Berwick, two other mutual friends, were doing, adding that Orenberg liked him but never understood him. "We fellows who are eccentric are always misunderstood in life," he said. "I used to have fits of depression. I have none now. I am happy now. I want my father to know about this. We used to talk about spiritual things, but he will be hard to convince. My mother will be easier..."²

At a later sitting, the Howards brought their daughter, Katharine. G. P. came through and asked Katharine about her violin lessons, commenting (apparently jesting) that her playing was "horrible." Not realizing the humor in it, Mary Howard spoke up to defend her daughter's music, but Pellew then explained that he mentioned it because that is what he used to do when in the flesh. It was intended as verification of his identity.

Jim Howard returned alone for a sitting on December 22, 1892 and asked Pellew to tell him something that only the two of them knew. In fact, Pellew told Howard something so private and personal that Howard did not want it made part of the record, but he informed Hodgson that he was perfectly satisfied with facts related by Pellew.

Pellew gradually learned to "manage the light" and usurped much of Phinuit's authority as a control. Phinuit complained to Hodgson of

Pellew being too domineering. "I never saw the like of that fellow George," Phinuit grumbled to Hodgson and Professor William Newbold at a sitting on June 25, 1894. "There's another here trying to say something but he gave no chance at all. When he gets hold he keeps hold I tell you, Hodgson."³

As Pellew took command and subordinated Phinuit to an assistant's role, Mrs. Piper began changing from a trance-voice medium to a trance-writing medium. Now, she sat at a table and rested her head on a pillow on the table, her face toward the left. Writing material was arranged on the right side, usually 100 blank sheets and four or five soft-lead pencils. After she went into the trance state, the experimenter had to arrange the paper and place the pencil in her hand so that she could conveniently write, and he had to quickly remove each sheet of paper after it was filled.

Pellew coached other spirits on how to use Mrs. Piper's hand and stood by to assist them. One sitter, identified only as "Mrs. M." by Hodgson, stated that the Pellew method of communication was even more convincing than the Phinuit method. "...perhaps the most convincing thing is the accumulation of little touches of personality which make the sittings so real to me, but which it would be impossible to reproduce in print," she wrote to Hodgson. "Peculiarities of expression in the writing and of manner in that wonderfully dramatic hand of Mrs. Piper's. Anyone who has had a good sitting with Mrs. Piper will know exactly what I mean. One feels the hand is alive with a distinct personality very different from Phinuit. The behavior of the hand when it is controlled by my (deceased) husband or my brother is as distinct and as characteristic of the two men as anything of the kind could possibly be."⁴

Hodgson reported that there were times when Pellew would be communicating through Piper's hand while Phinuit would be transmitting through her voice – each relaying information from different spirits on different subjects. Over

the period of time during which Pellew communicated, Hodgson brought 150 sitters, 30 of whom were known to Pellew when he was alive. In each case, Pellew greeted them by name. The non-recognition of the other 120 was contrary to the telepathic and cosmic soul theories. That is, if Pellew, or Mrs. Piper's secondary personality, had been reading minds or searching in some cosmic computer, he (she) would have known the names of all of them.

Beginning in 1895, the quality of the messages began to deteriorate and there were indications that devious earthbound spirits were able to control Piper's organism. Deceased writers Sir Walter Scott and George Eliot supposedly communicated directly through Piper's hand, but the nature of the communication suggested impostors.

Pellew and Phinuit gradually gave way to "Rector" of the Imperator band of 49. Rector told them that Piper's organism was weakening and needed a rest. Pellew remained and worked with Rector. On June 8, 1897, Pellew warned Hodgson not to accept anything further as coming from him, implying that it might be an earthbound spirit posing as him. He added that he might not have the pleasure of seeing him for a long time. Rector cautioned Hodgson not to rely too much on Pellew as he was "too far away," i.e., too advanced, to be effective. "His spirit is pure, his mind sincere, his whole life here is one of honor and one to be respected by us all," Rector wrote through Piper's hand. "Yet, we would speak the truth and say his work in your field is done."⁵ However, Pellew apparently continued as an assistant to Rector for a

number of years, at least until 1904 and then later began communicating with Professor James Hyslop through the mediumship of Minnie Soule, who was referred to as "Mrs. Chenoweth" for privacy purposes.

The emergence of Pellew moved Hodgson and other researchers to a belief that spirits of the dead were in fact communicating. In effect, 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 for a medium to tap into another mind or cosmic reservoir for information, quite another for that other mind or reservoir to dialogue with the fullness of a personality rather than just fragmentary bits of information.



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¹ Holt, Henry, *On the Cosmic Relations*, Houghton Mifflin Co., 1914, p. 468.

² _____ 469-470.

³ _____ 590.

⁴ _____ 516-517 .

⁵ _____ 528.

Lodge, Sir Oliver, *The Survival of Man*, Methuen & Co., Ltd., 1909.

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