

## Biography of William T. Stead (1849-1912)

Known to the general public primarily as a dedicated journalist, author, social reformer, and pacifist, William Thomas Stead (July 5, 1849 to April 15, 1912) was on his way to New York to give a speech on world peace at Carnegie Hall when he became a victim of the *Titanic*.

Stead is remembered in psychic circles as the founder of *Borderland*, a quarterly journal devoted to psychical subjects, and as founder of Julia's Bureau, a psychic bureau intended to demonstrate the reality of survival after death as well as to assist in a spiritual revival. In 1891-92, stories from *Borderland* were compiled into two separate volumes – *Real Ghost Stories* and *More Ghost Stories*, and in 1897 they were published under one title, *Real Ghost Stories*. These true cases of apparitions, hauntings, astral projection, clairvoyance, and premonitions, collected by Stead, have since become a classic under the title *Borderland*. Stead was also an automatic writing medium when alive and a frequent spirit communicator after his death.

Born at Embleton, Northumberland, England, Stead was first educated by his father, a Congregationalist minister, and later attended Silcoates School, Wakefield. In 1863, he became an office boy in a merchant's countinghouse in Newcastle-on-Tyne. The poems of James Russell Lowell played an important part in shaping his life's work, which, he decided, around age 18, was to help other people.

Stead's career as a journalist and author began during the 1860's when he became a reporter for a newspaper called the *Northern Echo*, advancing to editor in 1871. In 1880, he accepted a position as assistant editor of the *Pall Mall Gazette*, then became its editor in 1883. In 1890, he founded the *Review of Reviews*. According to

Leslie Shepard, who wrote the Introduction to the New American Edition of *Borderland*, published in 1970, Stead is credited with inventing the "New Journalism," bringing important topics in bright, colorful prose to the man in the street. Shepard states that he introduced the interview technique to British journalism and was a pioneer of cheap reprints for mass sale in the form of penny pamphlets.



In a story written by B. O. Flower, the editor of *Arena*, a popular American publication, Stead is referred to as a cosmopolitan journalist "with a rare blending of intellectual force with moral conviction, idealism with utilitarianism, a virile imagination, and a common sense practicality that strove to make the vision a useful reality."

One survivor of the *Titanic* reported seeing Stead calmly sitting in the smoking room reading his Bible as other passengers scurried to the decks and the lifeboats. Another survivor recalled seeing Stead calmly holding back men who were attempting to board the lifeboats with the women and children. Stead was also remembered for

having frequently discussed spiritual matters during meals on the *Titanic*.

In one of his many stories, *From the Old World to the New*, a novel published in 1892, Stead described the sinking of a ship called the *Majestic* in the North Atlantic from hitting an iceberg. The name of the ship's captain was Edward J. Smith, the same name of the captain of the *Titanic*. In an 1886 story for *The Pall Mall Gazette*, Stead wrote about the sinking of an ocean liner and how lives were lost because there were too few lifeboats. Whether these two separate stories were precognition on Stead's part or merely coincidence is not known, but Stead apparently did not foresee the tragedy when he booked passage on the *Titanic*.

In 1909, three years before his death, he published *Letters from Julia*, a series of messages purportedly coming to Stead from Julia T. Ames, an American newspaperwoman, for her friend Ellen, during 1892-93. Stead had met both women on his travels, and several months after Julia's death, Ellen told Stead about seeing apparitions of Julia in her bedroom. Having recently discovered that he had the gift of automatic writing, Stead told Ellen that he would see if she could communicate through him. "Sitting alone with a tranquil mind, I consciously placed my right hand, with the pen held in the ordinary way, at the disposal of Julia, and watched with keen and skeptical interest to see what it would write," Stead explained in the book's Introduction. Julia's Bureau was formed that same year.

Hester Travers Smith, a Dublin medium, recalled a sitting, on April 15, 1912, when she and a "Miss D." received a very rapid message stating: "Ship sinking; all hands lost. William East overboard. Women and children weeping and wailing – sorrow, sorrow, sorrow." They had no idea what the message meant and no more came through at that sitting. Later that day they heard that the *Titanic* had sunk. As a spirit claiming to be Stead communicated at subsequent sittings, Travers Smith concluded that because of the rapidity of the message they got the last name wrong the first time.

According to Rev. Charles L. Tweedale, the Church of England vicar of Weston, Stead appeared at a sitting given by Etta Wriedt in New York on April 17, two days after the disaster. Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, the physician who created Sherlock Holmes, called Wriedt the best direct-voice medium in the world and the plan was for Stead to accompany Wriedt back to England on his return voyage so that she could demonstrate her gift there. Wriedt made the trip without Stead and gave a sitting on May 6 in Wimbledon. In attendance were Vice-Admiral W. Osborne Moore and Estelle Stead, Stead's daughter. Moore reported that Stead talked with his daughter for at least 40 minutes. He described it as the most painful but most realistic and convincing conversation he had heard during his investigations of mediumship.

General Sir Alfred E. Turner reported that he held a small and private sitting at his home with Mrs. Wriedt. "We had hardly commenced when a voice, which apparently came from behind my right shoulder, exclaimed: 'I am so happy to be with you again,' Turner reported. "The voice was unmistakably that of Stead, who immediately began to tell us the events of the dire moments when the leviathan settled down. There was a short, sharp struggle to gain his breath and immediately afterwards he came to his senses in another stage of existence." At a later sitting with Wriedt, Turner saw Stead materialize, wearing his usual attire.

Tweedale also recorded that Stead was seen and heard on July 17, 1912 at the home of Professor James Coates of Rothesay, a well-known author and investigator, who had Mrs. Wriedt give a sitting with a number of witnesses. "Mr. Stead showed himself twice within a short time, the last appearance being clearly defined, and none will readily forget the clear, ringing tones of his voice," Tweedale quoted Coates. "There in our own home, and in the presence of fourteen sane and thoughtful people, Mr. Stead has manifested and proved in his own person that the dead do return."

Dr. John S. King, a Toronto physician and president of the Canadian Society Psychical Research, reported receiving over 70 messages from Stead, the first one coming within two days of the Titanic disaster. They came through several mediums, including Mrs. Wriedt.

When the *Titanic* went down, Estelle, Stead's daughter, was on a tour with her own Shakespearean Company. One of the members of the touring group was a young man named Pardoe Woodman. According to Estelle Stead, a few days before the disaster, Woodman told her over tea that there was to be a great disaster at sea and that an elderly man very close to her would be among the victims. In 1917, shortly after being discharged from the army, Woodman began receiving messages from William T. Stead by means of automatic writing. Estelle Stead then started sitting with Woodman and observing. She noted that the Woodman wrote with his eyes closed and that the writing was very much like her father's. Moreover, the writing would stop at times and go back to dot the "i's" and cross the "t's," a habit of her father's which she was sure Woodman knew nothing about.

Stead informed his daughter that there were hundreds of souls hovering over their floating bodies after the big ship went down, some of them apparently not comprehending their new state as they complained about not being able to save all of their valuables. After what felt like a few minutes, they all seemed to rise vertically into the air at a terrific speed. "I cannot tell how long our journey lasted, nor how far from the earth we were when arrived, but it was a gloriously beautiful arrival," Stead recorded through Woodman's hand. "It was like walking from your own English winter gloom into the radiance of an Indian sky. There, all was brightness and beauty."

As for his initial attempts to communicate through other mediums, Stead said that there were souls on his side who had the power of sensing people (mediums) who could be used for communication. One such soul helped him find mediums and showed him how to make his pres-

ence known. It was explained to him that he had to visualize himself among the people in the flesh and imagine that he was standing there in the flesh with a strong light thrown upon himself. "Hold the visualization very deliberately and in detail, and keep it fixed upon my mind, that at that moment I *was* there and they were conscious of it."

He added that the people at one sitting were able to see only his face because he had seen himself as only a face. "I imagined the part they would recognize me by." It was in the same way he was able to get a message through. He stood by the most sensitive person there, concentrated his mind on a short sentence, and repeated it with much emphasis and deliberation until he could hear part of it spoken by the person.

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