

ARTICLES



D. Scott Rogo

1950-1990. One of the most widely respected writer-journalists covering the field of parapsychology. Attended the University of Cincinnati and then San Fernando Valley State College from which he graduated in 1972 with a B.A. in music. Served as a visiting researcher at both the Psychical Research Foundation (then in Durham, North Carolina) and the (former) Division of Parapsychology and Psychophysics of Maimonides Medical Center in Brooklyn, New York. He published three papers reporting experimental research on the ganzfeld and conducted a study on personality factors of successful ganzfeld subjects. Scott was also active in field investigations of hauntings and poltergeists. Not only did he produce many books and popular articles, but in addition he published full papers in all of the professional, English-language, refereed parapsychology journals. Scott was also consulting editor for *Fate* where he wrote a regular column on parapsychology. Tragically, on August 18, 1990, Scott was found stabbed to death in his home.

Psychical Research and the Survival Controversy (Part 2)

The Foundations of Survival Research

- D. Scott Rogo -

IN ORDER to understand the complexities of the survival issue, you must first understand a little about the history of psychical research. Parapsychology today is an experimental science; and most professional researchers devote themselves to testing people in the laboratory for telepathy, clairvoyance, precognition, and mind over matter. This is actually only the newest face parapsychology has adopted during its short history, in its search for scientific respectability. The science of parapsychology actually dates back to the 1880s, which was an era before the advent of complicated statistics, psychophysiology, and the other tools used by parapsychologists today. Psychical research in those early years was a more philosophical and existential pursuit, since it emerged from a society very different from that of today.

Several factors contributed to the way culture was forced to change during the Victorian age, and these factors naturally influenced the way in which psychical research first developed. This was an age where science and scientific achievements were challenging the religious authority that had guided European thought for the previous five hundred years. The nineteenth century was an age of industry and invention, and many people believed that science, and not religion, would salvage mankind and prove him master of the universe. It didn't help matters either when Charles Darwin, the brilliant British scientist and thinker; came forth with *The Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection* and (later) *The Descent of Man*. Darwinian thinking implied that man was merely a part of the existing world order and not set apart from it. Darwin's discoveries demonstrated that man did not suffer a spiritual 'fall' from Divine grace when he came to inhabit the earth, but merely evolved from lower life forms. This represented a challenge to Christian authority, which taught that man must fight to regain the spiritual status he lost at the beginning of time. During these years, scholars in Germany were also showing that even the Bible itself was not an infallible document, but could be critically analysed like any other piece of literature and what they were uncovering was disturbing to the religious establishment.

What resulted was a society which, for the first time in years, would not adopt a spiritual world-view simply on the basis of religious dogma. Science was raising mankind above the gods, and it looked as though religion would have to adopt the methods of science in order to prove such doctrines as the soul and its immortality.

It was also during these critical years that a small sect came surging out of the United States. Spiritualism was a small religious movement whose roots dug deeply into the American culture of the 1840s and '50s. The development of the movement dated back to 1848, when several eyewitnesses were able to observe some poltergeistic antics in a cottage located in Hydesville, New York. The outbreak consisted chiefly of intelligent rappings, and focused on two teenaged girls living in the house [Margaret and Kate Fox](#), whose father was a local farmer; were soon travelling throughout the East demonstrating their power to bring through the raps from the spirit world. These demonstrations piqued the interest of the scientific community as well as the general public, who saw in the paranormal the basis for a new religion ... a religion which taught that communication with the dead was a common reality. Whether or not these first two 'mediums' were genuine or fake is really inconsequential, for spiritualism was now on the rise.

What so appealed to the American public was that spiritualism appeared to be 'scientific' religion. It didn't base its theology on dogma or authority, but taught that each seeker could prove its main tenets for him or herself. The sceptic merely had to procure the services of a good psychic or trance medium.

The rise and spread of the spiritualist movement not only influenced popular culture, but came to the attention of the British intellectual establishment as well. The advancement of spiritualism in England occurred at about the same time that a number of British philosophers, loosely connected by their association with Cambridge University, were grappling with religious doubts of their own. Chief among these thinkers was Professor [Henry Sidgwick](#), who was an influential philosopher and a professor at the university. His fellow intellectuals included his former pupil [F. W. H. Myers](#), and [Edmund Gurney](#), a Cambridge graduate and a musicologist of no mean merit.

These intellectuals were acutely distressed by the changes they were seeing in British culture and thinking. They were the sons of ministers and had been brought up to cherish Christian values and beliefs. It troubled them to see society turning from the old doctrines, but at the same time, they realized that these changes were logical in the radically changing world. They were aware that society was about to be deluged in a wave of atheism and materialism, which they felt would mark the decline of society. So they soon became committed to finding a way of re-establishing the Christian order. Since they could no longer rely on polemics or philosophical reasoning, they found themselves in quite a quandary. And it was at this time that they began casting a still-suspicious eye at the spiritualist movement which had emigrated to England in 1852. The Cambridge group finally decided that it was in this arena that they could make their most important gains. For if the supernatural could be scientifically demonstrated, they believed, their findings could be used to reject Victorian materialism.

It should be pointed out, though, that the Cambridge group was not out to 'prove' spiritualism. The members merely reasoned that if the phenomena of spiritualism were genuine, these strange events would reconfirm the spiritual nature of man. Some critics of the groups work also charged that these thinkers were emotionally committed to finding proof of life after death. This, however, was hardly the case. Professor Sidgwick and his colleagues were eager to find scientific evidence with which they could rebut the tide of materialism popular in their day. But they also realized that this evidence would have to be strong enough to influence any objective critic, as well as satisfy their own challenging doubts.

This, in fact, is one of the reasons why the survival controversy has never been resolved within parapsychology. The founders of the science soon learned that finding proof of life after death, an issue that indeed became central to them, was not as easy as solving a problem in logic or the solution to an algebraic equation.

The most important outcome from these years of search and questioning came in 1882, when the Cambridge group joined forces with several of the more critical members of the spiritualist movement. Together they founded the Society for Psychical Research, which became the first scientific body devoted to the study of the paranormal. The goal of the SPR was to investigate reports of psychic phenomena, establish criteria for what constituted evidence, and then determine the nature of these events. The Society undertook these studies in a critical frame of mind, and many notable figures in British history joined forces with it. These included several eminent scientists as well as a few political leaders.

The science of modern parapsychology was born through the endeavours of the SPR. In time even the spiritualist elements fell away from the Society as the original Cambridge group began applying more and more critical standards to their studies. For better or for worse, the SPR eventually freed itself from its early religious associations. It became essentially a society devoted to separating fact from fiction and fraud in the study of psychic phenomena.

The founders of the SPR set about to study a rich variety of paranormal phenomena, not all of which directly related to the survival problem. They investigated cases of telepathy occurring in everyday life spearheaded experimental research on thought-transference looked into poltergeist cases, and were fascinated by the study of hypnosis. But the central concern of the SPR was with the survival issue.

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[Some Personal Thoughts on Survival Spontaneous Contact with the Dead](#)



The Fox sisters cause a table to levitate at Rochester in the 1850s; such physical feats were supposed to be caused by the spirits, thus giving evidence of survival. (Mary Evans Picture Library)