

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 6) New Developments in Research on Mediumship

- D. Scott Rogo -

THE DECLINE of the [Piper](#) mediumship and the cross-correspondences in general after 1910 or so did not impede the progress of survival research in Great Britain, however. It merely closed one chapter in the search while opening up yet others. Psychological researchers were becoming more sophisticated by this time and they were beginning to realize that they needed new ways of exploring the nature of trance mediumship. That chance came in 1915 when Sir [Oliver Lodge](#) brought the SPR's attention to yet another great medium. She was a native born English woman who sported a trance guide name 'Fedá', who in turn claimed to be from India where she had died as a child. Unlikely it may have sounded, but research with this talented trance medium would occupy organized psychical research for the next two decades and beyond.

Mrs [Gladys Osborne Leonard](#) was born in 1882. She experienced visions and paranormal encounters as a child, but like so many other psychics her mediumship didn't blossom until she started experimenting with table-tilting in the basement of a theatre where she was working as an actress. Trance followed and by 1915 she was becoming prominent in London spiritualist circles. A friend of Sir Oliver Lodge and his wife attended one of her sittings that year and were impressed enough to recommend her to the physicist. Lodge sat with her after learning about her talents, and he and his wife received a number of evidential communications from their son, who had been killed in the war. The most impressive piece of evidence was a detailed description of a photograph which the communicator claimed had been taken of himself with his platoon. This photograph arrived in the mail some time after the sitting [11]

[11] Lodge, Oliver. *Raymond*. New York: Doran, 1916.

Lodge was thoroughly acquainted with the psychology of mediumship through his long association with the Piper work, but it fell to new and more innovative researchers to explore the possibilities offered by the Leonard mediumship.

Probably the most celebrated series of experiments made with Mrs Leonard was undertaken by Ann Radclyffe-Hall, the celebrated novelist then serving on the SPR's council, and Una, Lady Troubridge in 1919. The main communicator during these sittings was a deceased friend of Miss Radclyffe-Hall, referred to only by her initials (AVB) in the reports.[12] The two investigators had their first sitting with Mrs Leonard at her home on 19 August, during which Fedá described a woman about 60 years old who wished to communicate. She also described the woman's facial features and the way she wore her hair. These were clues that allowed Miss Radclyffe-Hall to identify the communicator since her friend had only recently died, at the age of 57. The AVB persona also communicated at the next sitting, at which time Fedá explained how the communicator 'looks sideways at people sometimes, without moving her head, she's looking at you like that now'. This was all very characteristic of the living Miss AVB, and the description impressed the sitters.

[12] Radclyffe-Hall, Ann and Una, Lady Troubridge. On a series of sittings with Mrs Osborne Leonard. *Proceedings: Society for Psychical Research*, 1920, 30, 339-554.

Perhaps the most critical sitting of the series was held on 22 November The communicator used this occasion to deliver a group of evidential messages about a trip to the Canary Islands which she and Miss Radclyffe-Hall had once undertaken. The persona described the scenes of their adventures together, and finally mentioned which islands they visited. To quote from the records of the sitting:

Fedá: Do you know anything about an island, that is not far from there?

MRH: Yes, I do know something about an island.

Fedá: She suddenly said: 'Island, island, island,' she keeps on showing Fedá a piece of land standing in the middle of water, and she says: 'It's a piece of land standing in water'

MRH: Yes, it is an island.

Fedá: She says that place is called Ter - ter - terra - oh! Fedá cant quite get it, but she wants to say that it's a place called Ter - Te - no, Fedá can't get it, but it starts Te. Ifs Tener - Tener - Ten - Ten - What, Lady? Tener -

MRH: Tener is right.

Fedá: Teneri - Teneri - cc - cc - ff - ffe - ife - Teneri-fer. She says she doesn't agree with the 'fer' she says Tener is right, she says cut off the last 'er' and it's right.

Fedá: (Sotto voce: Tenerife, it's Tenerife!) She keeps on saying an island, it's an island she says, and she says its a nice place, she says: 'Tenerife!' Do you know, she pushed that through suddenly? She pretended that she was exasperated at your not understanding. She thought that Fedá would get hold of it if she pretended to be cross. Now, she's saying that there's that place called M. again. - Masager - Masager - Madaga - Maza.

MRH: Maza is right, Fedá.

Fedá: Mazaga - Mazager - Mazagi - Mazagon - (We here omit several other efforts on Fedá's part to pronounce the name, which efforts end with Mazagal.)

MRH: No, not quite Mazagal, Fedá.

Fedá: Mazagan!

MRH: That's right, Fedá.

Mazagan was the name of a city in Morocco the two women had visited en route to the Canary Islands.

During a later sitting, Miss Radclyffe-Hall put a 'test' question to the communicator. She asked Fedá (through the entranced sensitive) whether the communicator could remember the word 'poon.' Fedá immediately responded that the communicator was laughing and replying that the word was used to express a state or condition. This correct response encouraged the sitter to ask the communicator to cite the other word they had once coined. Fedá seemed to have difficulty receiving the word from the entity, so the matter was dropped for the moment. But at the next sitting Fedá suddenly interrupted her line of thought to exclaim, 'Sporkish! Sporkish. She says its the antithesis to poon.'

This was correct. The two women had invented these words as a private code to designate those people whose dispositions they liked or found annoying.

The sittings undertaken by Miss Radclyffe-Hall and Una, Lady Troubridge to contact Miss AVB lasted for two years. The communicator even developed the ability to control the medium directly, who often spoke with the same vocal characteristics typical of the woman's speech in life. This dramatic aspect of the Leonard mediumship was not isolated to this one case, since many other sitters during these years found their deceased relatives directly controlling the trance. Mrs Leonard's whole demeanour would change on these occasions, and she would take on the vocal and even the physical characteristics of the communicators. These verisimilitudes were extremely impressive to many of the sitters.

Despite the fact that the Radclyffe-Hall reports were extremely evidential, they really contributed little to the survival question. Despite the very dramatic quality of the Leonard mediumship and the evidence, the sceptics still maintained that the crucial information could have been telepathically derived from the sitters' own minds. It was obvious that a fresh approach to the study of mediumship was needed, and it came about when [C. Drayton Thomas](#), a British clergyman and an active SPR member started working with Mrs Leonard in 1917. He sat regularly with the psychic at her home in London and received rather voluminous messages from his departed father and sister Drayton Thomas also instituted a peculiar sort of test with his father's entity, which became known as 'book tests', and which opened a new chapter in the search for evidence for psychic survival.[13] For these experiments, Drayton Thomas would ask the communicator to psychically scan books either in a sealed package or at home in his own library The idea was to force the communicator to offer information that couldn't be stolen from the sitter's own mind.

[13] Thomas, C. Drayton. *Some New Evidence for Human Survival*. New York: Dutton, n.d.

These experiments worked extremely well. One of the most dramatic tests of this kind came during one of Drayton Thomas's first sittings with Mrs Leonard. He explains in his report how he was sitting at home one night when he heard some peculiar 'raps' in the house. His first thought was that these might be attempts on the part of his father to establish psychic contact with him. He attended a sitting with Mrs Leonard soon after where he learned more about the mystery. Fedá - without any prompting on the sitter's part - spontaneously alluded to the incident and claimed that she was the one who had rapped in the clergyman's house. Fedá then brought through Drayton Thomas's father, who communicated a rather cryptic message through Fedá's proxy. The communicator instructed his son to return home and find a volume '... behind your study door; the second shelf from the ground, and fifth book from the left. Near the top of page 17 you will see words which seem to indicate what Fedá was attempting to do when knocking in your room'. The communicator added, 'Now that you are aware that it is Fedá's attempt you will see the unmistakable bearing of these words upon it'.

The clergyman could hardly wait to get home in order to see if Fedá and his father were correct. The book designated at the sitting turned out to be a volume of Shakespeare. The page indicated contained a most appropriate passage from *King Henry IV* which read, 'I will not answer thee with words, but blows'.

Successes such as these were numerous and their accuracy could not be explained away as the result of coincidence. In fact, some of the SPR researchers - spurred on by Drayton Thomas's successes - conducted mock book tests among themselves and came up with practically no success. Drayton Thomas later expanded these experiments by having his father's persona predict words and passages that would appear in the next day's newspapers. These experiments, too, were highly successful.

The results certainly indicated that Mrs Leonard possessed extraordinary psychic ability. Drayton Thomas also succeeded in demonstrating that simple telepathy could not account for much of the information his father's revenant was communicating. He therefore favoured a spiritistic interpretation of the communications. But looking back on all these experiments today from a more modern perspective, Drayton Thomas's opinion seems a little flawed. Researchers during these critical years did not, unfortunately, realize that a psychic could rely on clairvoyance and precognition just as easily as on telepathy. So the contemporary sceptic could easily argue that Mrs Leonard merely used her own psychic powers to read the books and newspapers, and then placed the information in the mouths of her ('self-proclaimed') communicators.

This type of theorizing is difficult to refute, but it doesn't explain the curious psychology of the book-tests. Drayton Thomas was able to show that his father's persona achieved his greatest successes when alluding to books that had been his personal favourites in life. This discovery seems much more consistent with the spiritistic theory. If Mrs Leonard were relying on her own psychic powers during the tests, she should have been equally successful with any of the volumes.

The Revd C. Drayton Thomas went on to explore several other aspects of the Leonard mediumship. He finally came to the conclusion that the best way to test the mediumship was by separating the sitter from the actual sessions completely. This led him to implement what he called 'proxy sittings', in which he would sit with the sensitive in the client's absence. He would merely show up for the appointment and explain to Fedá that he was sitting for an absent party who wished to make contact with a specific communicator. His hope was that Fedá would be able to bring through the desired individual even under these stringent conditions. The combined results of the many proxy sittings undertaken by Drayton Thomas, and later by Sir Oliver Lodge's secretary, demonstrated that the procedure A not impair the results. The most celebrated of these many proxy sittings was reported by the SPR in 1935, and concerned a series of seances the clergyman held on behalf of a stranger who had written to him. The gentleman wished to contact his deceased grandson, who had died only a month before.

Drayton Thomas was at first sceptical, since he didn't think that such a young communicator could manage to speak through the sensitive. His doubts were quickly dispelled. '[Bobbie Newlove](#)' was able to communicate with the help of the psychi's controls, and took little time sending a series of veridical messages to his grandfather. Included among these messages was the correct description of a dog-shaped salt-shaker he owned in life, a sandwich-poster costume he once wore, and even the name of the street that bordered his school. The most provocative message the boy communicated concerned some pipes located in a field near his school, where he liked to play. These pipes were eventually located and it seemed likely that the boy fell ill after drinking the stagnant water dripping from them.

Towards the end of her mediumship, Mrs Leonard finally developed what might be considered the ultimate proof of survival. The sitters could hear a third voice speaking in the séance room, which often whispered information to Fedá (who was directly controlling the medium's normal speech). This voice was sometimes quite loud and was often caught by the tape recorder; a new mechanical contrivance of the day, that was used to make permanent records of the Leonard mediumship. The tapes I have personally heard are extremely impressive since the 'direct voice' is loud and clear and definitely that of a man. (These tapes were made during some of Drayton Thomas's sittings and the direct voice is purportedly that of his father.) The voice sometimes sounds just as if there were a third person in the room, and it talks frequently and boldly throughout the session.

Mrs Leonard continued to give sittings into the 1940s. Her death came in 1968.

Despite all die evidence, no final solution to the survival problem ever evolved from the study of mediumship. The lure of the telepathic hypothesis soon became reincarnated as the 'super-ESP' theory - which argued that a psychic could use unlimited powers of telepathy and clairvoyance to build up his or her secondary personalities into spiritistic personations. Something akin to the super-ESP hypothesis was even partially demonstrated in 1921 when [S. G. Soal](#), a noted British psychic investigator; undertook a series of seances with Mrs [Blanche Cooper](#) at the British College of Psychic Science in London. He was able to establish contact with an old school acquaintance named Gordon Davis who communicated a number of evidential messages. The evidence for spirit communication was impressive, but it later turned out that the communicator was still alive. Subsequent research revealed that the psychic had described details of the house into which this gentleman only moved after the sittings were completed.*

* Since S. G. Soal later falsified the results of some of his ESP tests at the University of London, some researchers are sceptical of all his claims and reports. However there is some independent evidence that the Gordon Davis communications were received just as Soal recorded them. Gordon Davis also testified to the truth of the whole matter up until his death in the 1960s. It should also be noted that the other cases of spirit communicators who later turned up alive and well can be found in the literature.

By the 1930s survival research was becoming more and more frustrating. But the lack of finding definite proof for life after death was not the primary reason why the field left the survival issue behind to go on to other areas of research. Despite its emphasis on the survival problem, psychical research was also devoted to the study of extrasensory perception. Experimental research into the phenomena of telepathy, clairvoyance and precognition came to the forefront of parapsychology at this time. These years saw the emergence of the parapsychology programme at Duke University in Durham, North Carolina, where [J. B. Rhine](#) caused a stir in the scientific establishment with his new discoveries. By using simple statistical procedures, Rhine showed that many people could out-guess the laws of chance by 'calling' the order of geometric symbols stamped on cards. His data and approaches revolutionized the entire field. ESP testing soon became the rage at many American colleges and universities, and some of the younger guard at the SPR even left the SPR even though the safer confines of the laboratory. Parapsychology would never be the same.

Despite the fact that experimental research is currently at the forefront of parapsychology, this does not indicate that the survival issue should be considered a permanently 'shelved' issue. On the contrary, survival research has been making a slow but sure comeback since the 1970s. The reconsiderance of interest in the issue was, no doubt, sparked by the initial research that emerged from the Kidd legacy, described in the next chapter. Looking back over parapsychology's first century, it is clear that great gains were made in the study of the survival question. The first psychical researchers demonstrated that the issue of human immortality could be scientifically and critically explored. They also demonstrated that certain forms of psychic phenomena bore directly on the question. These phenomena - primarily apparitions and trance mediumship - could be used to build a legitimate *a priori* case for survival.

There were only two catches. First, the founders of the SPR found that exploring the survival problem was infinitely more complicated than they had imagined. They also failed to form a consensus on the criteria by which the survival issue could be authoritatively resolved.

Today, one hundred years after the birth of psychical research, parapsychologists find themselves still grappling with these same issues. So when the survival problem became of interest to research workers beginning in the 1970s, they found themselves exploring new directions in their search for evidence of man's immortality.

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