

**THE SOCIETY FOR  
PSYCHICAL RESEARCH: ITS  
RISE & PROGRESS & A  
SKETCH OF ITS WORK**

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The Society for Psychical Research: Its Rise & Progress & a Sketch of Its Work by Edward T. Bennett

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WITH FACSIMILE ILLUSTRATIONS  
OF THREE PAIRS OF THE  
THOUGHT-TRANSFERENCE DRAWINGS

BY

EDWARD T. BENNETT

Assistant-Secretary to the Society, 1882-1902

"What a man affirms from his own experience is always worth  
listening to. What a man denies is rarely worth attention."

—Prof. W. F. BARRETT, F.R.S.



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# CONTENTS

CHAPTER	PAGE
I. THE SOCIETY FOR PSYCHICAL RESEARCH :— ITS RISE AND PROGRESS . . . . .	5
II. THOUGHT-TRANSFERENCE OR TELEPATHY . . . . .	12
III. SUGGESTION—HYPNOTISM—PSYCHIC HEALING . . . . .	24
IV. THE SUBLIMINAL SELF . . . . .	32
V. APPARITIONS AND HAUNTINGS . . . . .	39
VI. EVIDENCE OF THE EXISTENCE OF INTELLIGENCES OTHER THAN "THE LIVING," AND OF THE REALITY OF INTERCOMMUNICATION . . . . .	47
VII. CONCLUSIONS . . . . .	54

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**NOTE.**

The writer is indebted to the Council of the Society for Psychical Research for kindly permitting quotations from the publications of the Society, and also for allowing the reproduction of some of the Thought-Transference Drawings.



# The Society for Psychical Research.

## CHAPTER I.

### ITS RISE AND PROGRESS.

**T**HE Society for Psychical Research was established in 1882, a little over twenty years ago. In January of that year a Conference of persons interested in certain branches of enquiry, which, in their opinion, had not received adequate attention and investigation from the literary and scientific world, met in London.

Six years previously, in 1876, Professor W. F. Barrett (now F.R.S.), of Dublin, read a Paper before the Meeting of the British Association in Glasgow, in which he gave a record of a series of experiments he had made, that led him to the belief that under certain conditions a transference of thoughts and ideas from one mind to another could occur, independently of the recognized channels of sensation. He urged the formation of a committee of scientific men to investigate this subject, along with other psychical phenomena, such as the so-called spiritistic manifestations which had been attested by distinguished men like Sir William Crookes and Dr. Alfred Russel Wallace. Owing to various causes, Professor Barrett's proposal fell through. The Paper, with some omissions and verbal alterations, is published in the *Proceedings* of the Society for Psychical Research, Vol. i., pp. 238—244. Professor Barrett returned to the question in letters to the *Times* and *Spectator* during 1876 and 1877, which elicited additional evidence. The results of further experiments on thought-transference in the normal (*i.e.*, not hypnotic) state are recorded by Professor Barrett in the columns of *Nature* for July 7th, 1881. At the conclusion of this letter Professor Barrett says:—"At the suggestion of Mr. G. J. Romanes I have arranged for a small committee of experts to

verify or disprove the conclusions at which I have arrived." That committee met, but the publication of the result of their labours lay outside the functions of every recognized scientific body.

As the existing scientific societies and journals were concerned only with the study of natural or normal, as distinguished from transcendental phenomena, the formation of a new Society became desirable. Furthermore, it was felt that such a Society would give encouragement to, and continuity in, the investigation, not only of Thought-Transference, but of all that large group of phenomena outside the boundaries of orthodox science. Impressed with these views, and with the far-reaching importance of such an enquiry, Professor Barrett, after discussing the matter with scientific and other friends, took steps to convene a meeting on the subject. There also existed a desire for more systematic and scientific enquiry among many Spiritualists. Mr. E. Dawson Rogers, who for a number of years had taken a leading part among Spiritualists, strongly supported the view that an endeavour should be made to start a Society which might attract some of the best minds who had hitherto held aloof from public association with such a work, and placed at Professor Barrett's disposal a central hall in London, wherein a conference might be held. Mr. C. C. Massey also gave Professor Barrett much valued help and encouragement.

Professor Barrett undertook the invitation of a number of persons, some well known in science and literature, and others who had had long experience in occult phenomena, all of whom were animated with an earnest desire for a more systematic enquiry into these debatable regions hitherto unexplored by science. The result was that the Conference mentioned above, in the opening paragraph, was held. Professor Barrett presided, and gave a full statement as to the proposed scope of such a Society, and of the grounds which in his opinion rendered it absolutely necessary. A resolution, supported by the Rev. W. Stainton Moses, Mr. C. C. Massey, Mr. F. W. H. Myers, Mr. G. J. Romanes, and others, was unanimously passed in favour of such a course.

A Committee was appointed, which held several meetings, and presented a report to an adjourned Conference on February 20th, 1882, when the Society was definitely constituted. The earliest public announcement of the Society was made in the columns of "Light," a weekly journal, on the 25th of February, 1882. A list of sixteen names is given as constituting the first Council. It is remarkable as showing the changes which can take place

in only twenty years, that of this list only two, Professor Barrett and the present writer, are left, who have continuously taken an active part in the work of the Society. Most of the other fourteen have been removed by death.

It was of inestimable value to the Society that Professor Henry Sidgwick, of Cambridge, consented to become its first President. He took an active part in drawing up the "Objects of the Society," the first official document which was issued. This document so well illustrates the courage on one hand, and the caution on the other, which was displayed in putting before the public the intentions of the founders of the Society, that a few extracts from it will not be out of place.

"It has been widely felt that the present is an opportune time for making an organised and systematic attempt to investigate that large group of debatable phenomena designated by such terms as mesmeric, psychical, and Spiritualistic.

"From the recorded testimony of many competent witnesses, past and present, including observations recently made by scientific men of eminence in various countries, there appears to be, amidst much illusion and deception, an important body of remarkable phenomena, which are *primò facie* inexplicable on any generally recognised hypothesis, and which, if incontestably established, would be of the highest possible value.

"The task of examining such residual phenomena has often been undertaken by individual effort, but never hitherto by a scientific Society organised on a sufficiently broad basis."<sup>\*</sup>

The following "Note," which is due mainly if not entirely to Professor Sidgwick, admirably states the position taken by the Society:—

"NOTE.—To prevent misconception, it is here expressly stated that Membership of this Society does not imply the acceptance of any particular explanation of the phenomena investigated, nor any belief as to the operation, in the physical world, of forces other than those recognised by Physical Science."<sup>†</sup>

This "Note" has been retained to the present time, in all editions of the "Objects of the Society."

The attitude of the public mind towards Psychical Research has so changed during the twenty years that it is difficult now

<sup>\*</sup> Proceedings, S.P.R., vol. i. p. 3.

<sup>†</sup> Proceedings, S.P.R., vol. i. p. 5.