

Sir William Barrett

Sir William Fletcher Barrett (February 10, 1844 – May 26, 1925) was one of the pioneers of psychical research. It was Barrett's idea to form the Society for Psychical Research (SPR) in London in 1882. However, since Barrett was living in Dublin, Ireland at the time, he was not able to take an active part in managing the Society. He left that up to three Cambridge scholars, Henry Sedgwick, Frederic W. H. Myers, and Edmund Gurney. Barrett also encouraged Professor William James of Harvard to organize the American branch of the SPR in 1884. He edited the SPR Journal from 1884-99 and served as president of the SPR in 1904.

Born in Jamaica, British West Indies, Barrett moved to England during his youth and studied under the famous physicist, John Tyndall, serving as Tyndall's assistant from 1862 to 1867. He lectured on physics at the Royal School of Naval Architecture before becoming professor of physics at the Royal College of Science in Dublin in 1873. He taught at the Royal College for 37 years, retiring in 1910, and was knighted in 1912.

In 1899, Barrett developed a silicon-iron alloy known as stalloy, used in the commercial development of the telephone and transformers, and also did pioneering research on entoptic vision, leading to the invention of the entoptiscope and a new optometer. He was a fellow of the Royal Society, Philosophical Society, Royal Society of Literature as well as a member of the Institute of Electrical Engineers and the Royal Irish Academy.

Barrett began to take an interest in psychic phenomena in 1874 after hearing of the research of renowned scientist William Crookes (later Sir William) with mediums. "In fact I began the whole investigation of these phenomena convinced that [mal-observation or hallucination] was their true explanation, and it was not until after stretching this hypothesis to illegitimate

lengths that I found the actual facts completely shattered my theory," Barrett explained his early views.¹



Then 29, Barrett began experimenting with hypnosis, more popularly known as "mesmerism" in those days. He observed a young girl under hypnosis correctly identify a playing card randomly taken from a pack and placed in a book that was put next to her head. He also observed another hypnotized person correctly identify fourteen cards taken at random from a pack. As a scientist, he found such results very disturbing. However, while many of his scientific colleagues simply scoffed at anything paranormal, Barrett was open-minded and determined to find some rational and scientific explanation. As he explained his 1917 book *On the Threshold of the Unseen*, his prior theories really began to fall apart sometime in 1876 when a prominent English solicitor (lawyer) named Clark spent the summer at a residence near his in Dublin. Clark's 10-year-old daughter, Florrie, produced various paranormal phenomena, including levitations and spirit "raps" that spelled out messages from an "intelligence" calling himself "Walter."

As a result of his experiments in hypnosis and his investigation of Florrie Clark, Barrett pre-

pared a paper to deliver to the British Association for the Advancement of Science. The Association rejected the paper as well as Barrett's request to present it orally to the group. After Crookes, Alfred Russel Wallace (co-originator with Charles Darwin of the natural selection theory of evolution), and Lord Rayleigh protested the Association's action, Barrett was allowed to deliver the paper but not publish it.

Barrett continued his investigation with other mediums, including Hester Travers Smith, Gladys Osborne Leonard, Kathleen Goligher, and Geraldine Cummins. In his 1917 book, he recalled the sitting with Goligher, who was being studied then by Dr. William Crawford of Queen's University. The sitting involved a small family circle gathered in a room illuminated with a bright gas flame burning in a lantern. "They sat round a small table with hands joined together, but no one touching the table," Barrett explained. "Very soon knocks came and messages were spelt out as one of us repeated the alphabet aloud. Suddenly the knocks increased in violence, and being encouraged, a tremendous bang came which shook the room and resembled the blow of a sledge hammer on an anvil. A tin trumpet which had been placed below the table now poked out its smaller end close under the top of the table near where I was sitting. I was allowed to try and catch it, but it dodged all my attempts in the most amusing way, the medium on the opposite side sat perfectly still, while at my request all held up their joined hands so that I could see no one was touching the trumpet, as it played peep-boo with me. Sounds like the sawing of wood, the bouncing of a ball, and other noises occurred, which were inexplicable."²

The table then began to rise from the floor some 18 inches and remained suspended in the air. "I was allowed to go up to the table and saw clearly no one was touching it, a clear space separating the sitters from the table," Barrett continued the explanation. "I tried to press the table down, and though I exerted all my strength could

not do so; then I climbed up on the table and sat on it, my feet off the floor, when I was swayed to and fro and finally tipped off. The table of its own accord now turned upside down, no one touching it, and I tried to lift it off the ground, but it could not be stirred, it appeared screwed down to the floor. At my request all the sitters' clasped hands had been kept raised above their heads, and I could see that no one was touching the table. When I desisted from trying to lift the inverted table from the floor, it righted itself again on its own accord, no one helping it. Numerous sounds displaying an amused intelligence then came, and after each individual present had been greeted with some farewell raps the sitting ended."³

Barrett said that he could not imagine how the cleverest conjurer could have performed what he experienced, especially since it was clear to him that there was no elaborate apparatus in the room. Moreover, Dr. Crawford had been observing the Goligher circle for six months or more before his observations. "That there is an unseen intelligence behind these manifestations is all we can say, but that is a tremendous assertion, and if admitted destroys the whole basis of materialism," Barrett added.⁴

During his 50 years of studying psychic phenomena, Barrett observed nearly every type of mediumship. In his reminiscences, read at a private meeting of the SPR on June 17, 1924, less than a year before his death, Barrett said: "I am personally convinced that the evidence we have published decidedly demonstrates (1) the existence of a spiritual world, (2) survival after death, and (3) of occasional communication from those who have passed over... It is however hardly possible to convey to others who have not had a similar experience an adequate idea of the strength and cumulative force of the evidence that has compelled [my] belief."⁵

Barrett is also remembered for his study of dowsing and deathbed visions. His book, *Death-Bed Visions*, first published in 1926, the year after his death, is still popular today. It offers a number

of intriguing reports in which a dying person appears to see and recognize some deceased relative or friend, some of them involving instances where the dying person was unaware of the previous death of the spirit form he sees. "These cases form, perhaps, one of the most cogent arguments for survival after death, as the evidential value and veridical (truth telling) character of these visions of the dying is greatly enhanced when the fact is undeniably established that the dying person was wholly ignorant of the decease of the person he or she so vividly sees," Barrett states in the Introduction.⁶

Several weeks after his death, Barrett's wife, Lady Florence Barrett, a prominent, obstetric surgeon and Dean of the London School of Medicine for Women, began receiving very evidential messages from Sir William through the mediumship of Mrs. Leonard. Over the next eleven years, she sat with Leonard every few months, taking verbatim notes as Sir William communicated. She also received evidential messages from several other mediums. A book, *Personality Survives Death*, published in 1937 by Longmans, Green and Co. of London, resulted from these sittings.

Lady Barrett asked Sir William how she might satisfy people that she was really talking to him. He replied that it depends on the type of mind, commenting that reference to a tear in the wallpaper in his old room might satisfy some people and not others. Lady Barrett noted that a

month before his death he had pointed out a tear in the wallpaper in one corner of his room. Sir William then said that some higher minds have gone well beyond the need for such trivial verification, mentioning another distinguished British physicist, still in the flesh, Sir Oliver Lodge. "Lodge is nearer the bigger, greater aspect of things than most," he stated.⁷

Sir William further explained that his objective in communicating with his wife was not simply to add to the mass of evidence already given concerning the survival of consciousness at death but to help find a working philosophy to guide those on earth who are struggling with finding a purpose in life. "It seems to me from where I am most people are not even struggling but meandering on purposelessly, blindly, because they have no definite philosophy as a starting point," he communicated.⁸ He went on to say that knowledge of the afterlife opens the gates of inspiration and makes the intuition keener. With that comes greater enthusiasm, greater understanding of the beauties of life, even the perceiving of beauty where ugliness had appeared to exist.

"Life on my side seems so extraordinarily easy compared to earth," Sir William offered in a 1929 sitting, "because we simply live according to the rules of love."⁹



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¹ Barrett, Sir William, *On the Threshold of the Unseen*, E.P. Dutton & Co., 1918, p. 37.

² _____, p. 47.

³ _____, p. 48.

⁴ _____, p. 49.

⁵ Barrett, Sir William, *Death-Bed Visions*, The Aquarian Press, 1986, p 162.

⁶ _____, p. 1.

⁷ Barrett, Lady Florence, *Personality Survives Death*, Longmans, Green and Co., 1937, p. 14

⁸ _____, p. 23.

⁹ _____, p. 104.