SOCIETY FOR PSYCHICAL RESEARCH

The SPR was founded in 1882 in London. Its purpose, which remains unchanged, is “to examine without prejudice or prepossession and in a scientific spirit those faculties of man, real or supposed, which appear to be inexplicable on any generally recognized hypothesis,” in the hope of empirically validating the independence of mind from material determinism. Edmund Dawson Rogers, a prominent spiritualist, and William Barrett, Professor of Physics at the Royal College of Science in Dublin who had conducted experiments on “thought-transference,” successfully solicited Henry Sidgwick, a moral philosopher at Cambridge with a reputation for skepticism, to become the Society’s first President in 1882. Early members included Charles Dodgson (Lewis Carroll), Alfred Lord Tennyson, and John Ruskin. In February 1883, the SPR established six investigative committees: the Committee on Thought-Transference, the Committee on Mesmerism, the Committee on Reichenbach’s Phenomenon, the Committee on Physical Phenomena, the Committee on Haunted Houses, and the Literary Committee. The Society’s two lead researchers, Frederick Myers and Edmund Gurney, focused on thought-transference, or “telepathy”—a term coined by Myers in 1882. In practice, much of the Society’s work consisted of exposing apparent instances of extrasensory perception (ESP) as fraudulent.

Bibliography: John Beloff, *Parapsychology: A Concise History* (New York: St. Martin’s, 1993).

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