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Robert Hare (1781-1858)

The author of more than 150 papers on scientific subjects, Robert Hare (January 17, 1781 to May 15, 1858), the son of an English emigrant, was a world-renowned inventor and an esteemed professor of chemistry at the University of Pennsylvania before becoming one of the first psychical researchers. Only John W. Edmonds, a New York Supreme Court judge, seems to have preceded Hare as a serious and dedicated psychical researcher.

Hare invented the oxy-hydrogen blowpipe, a forerunner of the modern welding torch, before he was 20 years old, and was the first person to fuse lime, magnesia, iridium, and platinum. In 1816, he invented the calorimotor, a type of battery from which heat is produced. This led to his invention of the deflagrator, which was employed in volatilizing and fusing carbon.

In 1818, Hare was called to the chair of chemistry and natural philosophy at William and Mary and that same year was appointed as professor of chemistry in the department of medicine at the University of Pennsylvania, where he would remain until his retirement in 1847. He was awarded honorary M.D. degrees from Yale in 1806 and Harvard in 1816. In 1839, he was the first recipient of the Rumford Award for his invention of the oxy-hydrogen blow-pipe and his improvements in galvanic methods. He was a member of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, the American Philosophical Society, and an honorary life member of the Smithsonian Institute. In addition to frequently writing on scientific subjects, Hare also wrote, using the pen name Eldred Grayson, articles on political, economic, and philosophical issues. In an 1810 article, *Brief View of the Policy and Resources of the United States,* Hare advanced the idea that credit is money. He also wrote frequently in opposition of slavery.

Hare began investigating mediums in 1853 after writing a letter to the *Philadelphia Inquirer* denouncing the "popular madness" being called Spiritualism by the American press. "In common with almost all educated persons of the nineteenth century, I had been brought up deaf to any testimony which claimed assistance from supernatural causes, such as ghosts, magic, or witchcraft," Hare wrote, "[and] I was at that time utterly incredulous of any cause of the phenomena excepting unconscious muscular action on the part of the persons with whom the phenomena were associated. The inference of [Professor Michael] Faraday, tending to the same conclusion, I thoroughly sanctioned."[1]

When one Amasa Holcombe wrote a letter to Hare and suggested that he investigate before coming to such a conclusion. Hare agreed it was the proper thing to do. Over the next 14 months, he sat with "22 or 23" different mediums. His

conversion to Spiritualism took place within three months of his first sitting with a medium and his 1855 book, *Experimental Investigation of the Spirit Manifestations* detailed his investigation and his new-found philosophy.

Inventor that he was, Hare contrived an apparatus called the spiritoscope, to facilitate and expedite communication, as the process he had observed was very slow. It was made up of a circular disc, the letters of the alphabet around the circumference of the disc, and had weights, pulleys, and cords attaching it to the tilting table. The medium would sit behind the table in order to supply the "psychic force" through which the spirits caused the table to tilt, but the medium could not see the wheel and had no idea what was being spelled out. Put to the test, the contraption worked and the first spirit to communicate was Hare's deceased father, Robert Sr. When Hare continued to doubt, the message came through, "Oh, my son, listen to reason!"[2] At a second sitting, his father again communicated, saying that his mother and sister also were there but not his brother. Personal information was given to Hare, information which Hare was certain the medium could not have researched.

In his third sitting, when the message was spelled out that his sister was there, Hare asked her for the name of their father's early business partner. She responded correctly with the name "Warren." He then asked her for the name of their English grandfather's partner, who had died in London more than 70 years earlier. She again responded with the correct name. With another medium, Hare asked his father for the name of an English cousin who had married an admiral. The father spelled out the name. Hare also asked his father for the maiden name of an English brother's wife. The Spiritoscope spelled out "Clargess," which was correct.

At a sitting with a Mrs Hayden, Hare received a message from a spirit identifying himself as C. H. Hare. "Not recollecting any one of our relations of that name precisely, I inquired if he were one of them," Hare wrote. "The reply was affirmative. "Are you a son of my cousin Charles Hare, of St. Johns, New Brunswick?" Hare asked. "Yes," was then spelled out. "This spirit then gave me the profession of my grandfather, also that of his father, and the fact of the former having been blown into the water at Toulon, and of the latter having made a miraculous escape from Verdun, where he had been confined until his knowledge of French enabled him to escape by personating in disguise an officer of the customs."[3]

Hare was unaware of the young man's death, but the brother of the communicating spirit visited Hare in Philadelphia some time later and informed him that his brother, Charles Henry, had been killed at sea in a shipwreck. Here was a message clearly outside the thought-transference theory, which held that the medium was reading the mind of the sitter.

In that same sitting with Mrs. Hayden, the words "pulsatque versatque" and "Quadrupedante" were spelled out by Hare's father. Hare immediately recognized the words as being from *Virgil* and recalled his father explaining the English meaning of the Latin words to him some 55 years earlier.[4]

On another occasion, Hare misplaced or lost a scroll. At a sitting with Mrs. Hayden, Hare asked his father if he knew what had become of the scroll. His father informed him that he had left it on the seat of the (trolley) car he had occupied the previous day. "Inquiring of the conductor, who was on duty in the car where it had been left, he said that it had been found on the seat, was safe at Portland, and should be returned to me the next day," Hare recorded. "This promise was realized."[5]

Hare received much other evidence and even became a medium himself. On 3 July 1855, Hare was staying at the Atlantic Hotel on Cape May Island and at 1 a.m., when he knew that his friend Mrs. Gourlay was conducting a séance in Philadelphia, he asked his deceased sister to go to

Mrs. Gourlay and request her to induce Dr. Gourlay, her husband, to go to the Philadelphia Bank to ascertain at what time a note would be due and that he would sit at his instrument 3:30 that day to receive the answer. "Accordingly, at that time, my [sister] manifested herself and gave me the result of the inquiry. On my return to the city, I learned from Mrs. Gourlay that my angelic messenger had interrupted a communication, which was taking place through the spiritoscope, in order to communicate my message, and, in consequence, her husband and brother went to the bank, and made the inquiry, of which the result was that communicated to me at half-past three o'clock by my spirit friend."[6]

Hare received much in the way of evidence and put many questions to the spirits. He asked them what the various mediumship phenomena was all about and was told that they were " a deliberate effort on the part of the inhabitants of the higher spheres to break through the partition which has interfered with the attainment, by mortals, of a correct idea of their destiny after death."[7] To carry out this intention, he was told, a delegation of advanced spirits has been appointed. He was further informed that lower spirits were allowed to take part in the undertaking because they were better able to make mechanical movements and loud rappings than those on the higher realms.

The spirits further told Hare that there were degrees of gradation between the lowest degrees of vice, ignorance, and folly and those of virtue, learning, and wisdom. One's initial place in the afterlife environment, he was told, was based on a sort of "moral specific gravity."

Hare came under attack for his beliefs and writings by his scientific colleagues. However, he remained steadfast in his new worldview. "It is a well-known saying that there is 'but one step between the sublime and the ridiculous," he explained. "….If I am a victim to an intellectual epidemic, my mental constitution did not yield at once to the miasma."[8]

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[1] Hare, Robert, *Experimental Investigation of the Spirit Manifestations*, Partridge & Brittan, 1855, p.37
[2] _____, p. 41
[3] _____, p. 53
[4] _____, p. 53
[5] _____, p. 53
[6] _____, p. 33
[7] _____, p. 85
[8] _____, p. 15