

## Pearl Curran (1883-1937)

Between 1913 and 1937, an author giving her name as Patience Worth produced approximately four million words, including seven books, some short stories, several plays, thousands of poems, and countless epigrams and aphorisms. She would be acclaimed a literary genius – her works compared with Shakespeare, Chaucer, and Spenser. She was called a wit, a poet, a dramatist, and a philosopher.

Some readers of her books may have thought that Patience Worth was alive in the flesh, when, in fact, she had been “dead” for several centuries. Her words were dictated through the mediumship of Pearl Curran (1883 – 1937), an American housewife from St. Louis, Missouri with only an elementary school education.

Patience Worth began communicating on the ouija board operated by Curran, Emily Hutchings, and Mary Pollard in 1913 as their husbands played pinochle in the next room. “Many moons ago I lived,” the communication began. “Again I come, Patience Worth my name.”<sup>1</sup> The three women pressed for more information, but Patience did not seem to want to talk about herself. Rather, she wanted to provide wisdom. She did reveal, however, that she was born in Dorsetshire, England during the 17th Century and migrated to

America where she was killed by American Indians at age 44 or 45.

It soon became clear that Curran was the medium. Until then, Curran had no interest in mediumship. However, once her gift was recognized, she moved from the ouija board to automatic writing, and then to clairaudient dictation.

In the October 1, 1915 issue of *Reedy’s Mirror*, a highly-regarded literary journal, William Marion Reedy told the world of his “flirtation” with Patience Worth. He explained that he had had many sittings with Mrs. Curran and that he had absolutely no question as to the integrity of the parties involved. He further noted that Curran did not always understand his questions or the responses by Patience Worth. He called the spiritual content of Patience’s poetry “an archaic Wordsworthianism, with a somewhat of Emersonism.” He described Patience as piquant in the extreme, witty and aphoristic in a homely way, and saucy but never rude. “She will not answer personal questions about herself or tell you the usual stock things of so many spirit communications,” he wrote, “about lost jack-knives in the distant past, or when your wealthy grandmother is going to die... None of that stuff goes with Patience... She is ready with repartee and she says things that probe the character of her questioners.”<sup>2</sup>

But Reedy rejected the idea that Patience Worth was a spirit, stating that he simply could not believe it possible for the dead to talk to the living. He considered the secondary personality theory, and even asked Patience if she and Mrs. Curran were the same entity. This theory, Reedy concluded, would be no less mysterious than the spirits theory. Patience immediately lashed out at



the suggestion that she was a secondary personality of Pearl Curran. "She be but she and I be me," Patience communicated.<sup>3</sup>

Called by Patience Worth her "harp," Pearl Curran was, at the time Patience started communicating, a 30-year-old housewife who had, following a nervous breakdown, dropped out of school at age 13. Inspired by her mother's love of music, she became a piano and voice teacher until, at age 24, she married John Curran, a businessman 12 years her senior. Curran's limited education and travel were totally inconsistent with theories of conscious fraud or subconscious memories. English scholars struggled with some of the archaic Anglo-Saxon language. In one of her novels, Patience dictated, "I wot he fetcheth in daub-smear'd smock." Even in the early 1900s, the word "fetch" was rarely used, but when used it meant to "go and get" someone or something. Patience used it as synonymous with "came" or "cometh," which philologists confirmed as the word's original meaning.

W. T. Allison, professor of English literature at the University of Manitoba, observed that Patience Worth dictated words found only in Melton's time and some of them had no meaning until researched in dialectic dictionaries and old books. Allison, who closely observed Curran, reported that in one evening 15 poems were produced in an hour and 15 minutes, an average of five minutes for each poem. "All were poured out with a speed that Tennyson or Browning could never have hoped to equal, and some of the 15 lyrics are so good that either of those great poets might be proud to have written them," Allison offered. He went on to say that Patience Worth "must be regarded as the outstanding phenomenon of our age, and I cannot help thinking of all time."<sup>4</sup>

When a philologist asked Patience how and why she used the language of so many different periods, she responded: "I do plod a twist of a path and it hath run from then till now." When asked to explain how she could dictate res-

ponses without a pause, she replied: "Ye see, man setteth up his cup and fillet it, but I be as the stream."<sup>5</sup>

Patience's most celebrated work, *The Sorry Tale*, a 644-page, 325,000 word novel about the last days of Jesus, was released in June 1917. As journalist Casper Yost, who was present when much of the book was dictated, explained, the story was begun without any previous knowledge on the part of Pearl Curran of the time and conditions of Palestine beyond what is revealed in the New Testament. Yet, the story goes far beyond what might be gleaned from the New Testament. "In one evening, 5,000 words were dictated, covering the account of the crucifixion," Yost reported.<sup>6</sup>

In its review of the book, *The National* wondered how the mysterious story-teller became familiar with the scent and sound and color and innumerable properties of Oriental market places and wildernesses, of Roman palaces, and halls of justice. The *New York Globe* stated that it exceeded *Ben Hur* and *Quo Vadis* as "a quaint realistic narrative." The Columbus (Ohio) *Dispatch* opined that no other book gives one so clear a view of customs, manners, and character of the peoples of the time and place.

Professor Roland Greene Usher, dean of history at Washington University, called *The Sorry Tale* "the greatest story of Christ penned since the Gospels were finished." He pointed out that the book was written in seventeenth-century English with no anachronisms.

Patience Worth continued to dictate until Thanksgiving Day, 1937, when Pearl Curran caught a cold. Pneumonia developed and she died nine days later. During nearly a quarter of a century of dictation, Patience Worth was investigated by numerous scholars and scientists. Many of them leaned toward the subconscious theory, but Dr. Walter Franklin Prince, who investigated for the American Society for Psychical Research, summed it up this way: "Either our concept of what we call the subconscious must be radically altered, so as to include potencies of which we

hitherto have had no knowledge, or else some cause operating through but not originating in the subconsciousness of Mrs. Curran must be acknowledged.”<sup>7</sup>

Although incomplete census records revealed at least two women named Patience Worth living in New England during the 17th Century, there was no way to confirm that this Patience Worth was one of them, or to otherwise provide veridical information supporting spirit communication. The evidence relating to Curran had to do with the observation that the information coming from Patience Worth clearly far exceeded Curran’s intellect, education, and experience.

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<sup>1</sup> Yost, Casper, S., *Patience Worth*, Henry Holt & Co., 1916, p. 2.

<sup>2</sup> Litvag, Irving, *Singer in the Shadows*, The MacMillan Co., 1972, pp. 56-69.

<sup>3</sup> \_\_\_\_\_, p. 61.

<sup>4</sup> Prince, Walter Franklin, *The Case of Patience Worth*, University Books, 1964 (original from Boston Society for Psychic Research, 1927) p. 56.

<sup>5</sup> Yost, p 39.

<sup>6</sup> Worth, Patience, *The Sorry Tale*, Henry Holt & Co., 1917, Preface.

<sup>7</sup> Prince, p. 509.