

HARRY PRICE-PRINCE OF GHOST-HUNTERS

AS often happens, someone in a New Zealand conversation group mentioned ghosts, and a journalist friend of mine, perhaps speaking without much thought, as we all do at times, pronounced such things to be nonsense. "May I ask," said a man well-known in the scientific world, "whether you have studied this matter?" The journalist replied that he had not. "Well," said the other, "I suggest that you defer expressing an opinion until you have done so." This scientist had been studying psychic phenomena for years. The journalist took it in good part, and became a friend of his rebuker.

The incident is recalled by the death in England of Harry Price, who was probably the most active and most famous "ghost-hunter" in history. It illustrates two aspects of an immensely wide and complex problem. We have the ignorant sceptic—in this case an intelligent and well-informed man—and the experienced investigator. But in addition to these types there are in society the huge armies of the credulous, the not-well-educated and closed-mind sceptics, and the indifferent. There are many grades of knowledge and conviction. Some will believe nothing; others will accept certain things; and acceptance of results does not always mean agreement on causes.

Field of Research

Moreover, "ghosts" is often just a popular catch-word used to cover a world of varied phenomena. Apparitions, communications with the dead by voice or rappings, production of lights and ectoplasm—all the activities connected with mediumship—are only part of what are called psychic phenomena, the concern of psychical research. Investigation branches out into the operations of poltergeists, that is "rattling ghosts," mischievous ghosts, who slam doors and throw things about, and into the realm of clairvoyance, second-sight, and thought-reading, amateur and professional. You might find in the libraries of psychical research mention of some music-hall entertainers who have mystified you. Even "The Georgia Magnet," a slender young woman who claimed that by some extraordinary power she could resist the combined strength of a number of strong men (she toured New Zealand many years ago and was challenged by doctors in the theatre), has been investigated. And research descends into the darkest of depths, those of witchcraft and the unspeakable rites of the Black Mass.

It is Harry Price's claim to fame that he covered so much ground with such zest and skill, raised the status of psychical research, and gave society a great body of fact and conclusions. Spiritualism is as old as the hills, but it is claimed that modern spiritualism was born a hundred years ago this year, for it was in 1848, in an American house, that the first "intelligent raps" were heard. The Spiritualist Church in New Zealand has been keeping the centennial. Eminent English men of science became interested, and in 1882 the Psychical Research Society was formed.

Spiritualism, so easily accepted among the enquiring, was exposed, like so many other things in the modern age, to the

light of scientific investigation. In the twentieth century two factors have affected, respectively, its popularity and its authenticity. On the one hand, the unprecedented loss of life in world wars drew numbers of bereaved persons to spiritualism as a solace; on the other, science provided the investigator with new and more formidable testing instruments. The equipment of the researcher in the psychical field is almost as diverse as the criminologist's. Harry Price's ghost-hunting "kit" included soft overshoes, steel measuring tape, sealing tools, electrical gear, camera and flash-bulbs, a bowl of mercury to detect tremors, a cinema camera with electrical release, and, for a long stay, infra-red filters, lamps and films.

Harry Price had a unique position in psychical investigation. He lacked the academic scientific training of men like Crookes and Oliver Lodge, but his experience—he had been conjuror and photographer among other things—made him handy and adaptable, and gave him knowledge of the world. Believing in publicity, he co-opted journalists among his many helpers, and published in readable form the results of his researches. *Confessions of a Ghost-Hunter* is likely to be a standard book for a long while. Price made investigation a full-time job. He set up a National Laboratory of Psychical Research, and transferred it, with his unrivalled library, to London University, which recognised such research as a fit subject for University study. To have secured this status for his life-work was an achievement of the highest importance.

Tested to the Limit

Price approached every problem in a double spirit. He was determined to test everything to the limit, to use every means to disclose natural causes if they were at the back of alleged supernatural manifestations, but he did not exclude the possibility that something supernatural might be the explanation. He was explicit about fair play. "Whether the psychic is false or genuine, you should visit her in a spirit of helpfulness and goodwill," he wrote. . . . "Be courteous and play the game. . . . If the medium happens to be genuine, any bad behaviour on your part will most certainly spoil the sitting for you, and you may miss some first-class evidence. There is a psychological factor which plays its part in a good seance. If you are sceptical, do not parade the fact; the person who exudes scepticism will never get very far in psychical research."

You were entitled, however, to take the most complete precautions, regardless of the medium's feelings. Man or woman, the medium should be stripped and thoroughly examined by two doctors, and asked to take a hot bath. Yet one medium, after undergoing a severe medical examination, produced "spooks" made out of cheese-cloth. She had swallowed the stuff and re-gurgitated it during the seance. So apparatus to explore the stomach may have to be added to the researcher's equipment. Price said there were scores of ways of faking spirit photographs, and "there is no good evidence that a spirit photograph has ever been produced." All this goes to show



BORLEY RECTORY before the fire—the most haunted house in England

how helpless the inexperienced and credulous may be in the hands of an unscrupulous medium.

Price investigated everything that came his way. He did a lot of work on the Continent, and declined tempting offers from the German Government to set himself up in Germany. His investigations ranged from the "talking monogoose" in the Isle of Man, to the staging on the Brocken in Germany, as part of the Goethe centennial celebrations, of the ancient witchcraft ritual associated with that mountain—a magic circle laid down, a white kid specially chosen at birth, and "a pure maiden." The goat did not turn into the "faire youth" of legend—not that Price had any expectation that it would!

However, Price's favourite subject was poltergeist-haunted houses. If you think haunted houses are just a joke, and what happens in them can be easily explained by natural causes and the infirmities of the mind, look at the records of Price's investigations. Most haunted houses, he said, were "just nonsense," but others were not. There was no joke about Borley Rectory, "the most haunted house in England." Manifestations at Borley began in 1863, and Price took up his investigation, which lasted for years, in 1929. The phenomena included mysterious footsteps, incessant bell-ringing, the throwing of things, strange lights, appearance and disappearance of objects, curious perfumes, messages on walls, and the ghost of a nun. Price took the house for a year, and kept it under observation night and day with the help of a carefully chosen company. They dug deeply into the history of the place.

The results were astounding. Phenomena went on under the noses of the observers. The printed record of the happenings in this one house fills two books. In the first volume, Price said of the fire that nearly destroyed Borley Rectory, that it "brought down the curtain on the most extraordinary and best documented case of haunting in the annals of psychical research," but he was wrong. Another volume was called for, one of 336 pages. For the fire did

not stop the happenings. "Intelligent observers who visited the ruins reported the recurrence of most of the old phenomena, and some new ones. Amid the burnt and blackened beams of the upper storey were heard the familiar paranormal footsteps and the familiar door-slamming—though there was very little to walk on and no doors to slam. And the famous Borley 'nun,' or her shadow, was seen again."

"I believe in ghosts!" said Price in a broadcast talk in 1937 about haunted houses, and especially this one. "Sceptic as I am regarding the alleged supernatural, I have been forced to the conclusion that certain buildings and places are inhabited by invisible beings—call them spirits or entities, or what you will—which manifest themselves in various ways, familiar to all readers of ghost stories. I have seen these things myself. Account for them as you may." In the second book on Borley Rectory, published in 1946, Price in effect repeated this conclusion.

Here we are in very deep waters indeed. Price notes that "the Borley story is almost completely centred on the clergy, their families, priests, monks, nuns, and the Church generally—especially the Roman Catholic Church," and that "the number of rectories where poltergeists have manifested themselves is legion." It must be a common reflection how very few of the countless millions who have died—so many of them in particularly tragic circumstances—have been reported as returning to earth. Price makes a similar comment about such phenomena as Borley's. In view of the innumerable tragedies of life, why are there so few genuine hauntings? He regrets that a University, or the Royal Society, did not take up Borley and issue an official report, but is sure that in another fifty years we shall know a great deal more about such matters. Whether it will be entirely to our good to know much more, may be a question, but we may say of Harry Price that more than anyone of his time he led the way towards that fuller knowledge.

—A.M.