

IMMORTAL LONGINGS: F. W. H. MYERS AND THE VICTORIAN SEARCH FOR LIFE AFTER DEATH by Trevor Hamilton. Exeter, UK: Imprint Academic, 2009. Pp xiv + 359, \$39.90 (cloth). ISBN- 9781845401238.

F. W. H. Myers, one of the founders of the Society for Psychical Research (SPR) and author of *Human Personality and Its Survival of Bodily Death*, has recently had somewhat of a revival, pun intended, a few years after the centenary of his death. He was the subject of a profile in a mainstream journal (Kelly & Alvarado, 2005), his work has been reassessed and updated in the light of contemporary psychology (Kelly et al., 2007), and now Trevor Hamilton has produced a carefully researched biography of this complex and original personality.

Myers was a man who evoked strong feelings, by no means all of them positive, and Hamilton acknowledges this from the start by quoting on page 1 two conflicting character summaries. One describes Myers' capacity for sympathy and comradeship, whereas the other refers to "despotism, meanness and all sorts of things lurking in the background" While acknowledging Myers' various achievements, Hamilton's book is not a hagiography. Myers is variously described as being arrogant and a snob, with a tendency to judge individuals by their social standing, to appreciate women largely on the grounds of their beauty, and to carefully point out that there was no reason to suppose that his name might indicate "Jewish descent." Although Myers' scholarship shows that he was a free-thinker carving out new territory on the edges of the developing science of his time, it is ironic that, as a person, he was bound in so many ways by the conventions of the class and country in which he was born.

It also becomes clear that Myers' personality had a strain of recklessness, evidenced not only by his night-time swim across the Niagara river but also by his self-conscious sense of superiority in appropriating the lines of other poets for his own work. The latter resulted in accusations of plagiarism and a university scandal. Nonetheless, although Hamilton is not blind to Myers' all-too-human flaws, he is still fairly successful in defending him from the ruthless character assassination of two earlier books by Trevor Hall: *The Strange Case of Edmund Gurney* (Hall, 1964) and *The Strange Story of Ada Goodrich Freer* (Hall, 1980). In them, Myers is cast as the worst kind of Victorian villain, implicated in all manner of shadowy deeds and capable of driving purer souls to suicide. Many of the weaknesses in Myers' character likely stemmed from the sense of entitlement of an academically and athletically gifted man who had fairly reasonable means at his disposal (although he exaggerated them when courting the woman who would eventually become his spouse). In this he differed little from many men of his time. The past is another country; they do things differently there.

To most readers, the particulars of Myers' life are likely to be of less interest than his contribution to psychology and psychical research. Typically the underlying rationale for one's obsessions and life work is to

be found in the darker unresolved areas of one's life. Such is the case with Myers. His life was marked by tragedy at an early age with the death of his father. As a child, the sight of a dead mole provoked a horror at the thought of a death without the possibility of resurrection, a dread that was to haunt him throughout his life, but it was probably the suicide of the love of his life, Annie Marshall, the wife of his cousin, that propelled Myers to investigate scientifically the possibility of survival. First, however, he sought to evaluate the possibility of the independence of the mind from the body as exemplified by ostensible psi abilities such as telepathy. As Alvarado (2009) makes clear, Myers' contribution to the work of the SPR and the range of his topics and inquiries was vast and masterly, covering areas such as hypnosis, dissociation, mediumship, telepathy, PK, and other issues that form the bedrock of modern parapsychology.

Although Myers' original reputation as a poet has not survived the times and he performed indifferently as a school supervisor, the empirical and theoretical contributions by him and a number of his SPR collaborators (Eleanor Sidgwick, Edmund Gurney, and others) have fared much better. With respect to a scientific approach to the study of "spiritual" matters, they did not take a priori positions for or against psi phenomena but followed a number of methodological strategies that remain cornerstones in scientific inquiry: trying to avoid biases, being systematic in the collection of data, investigating the possibility of fraud and non-psi explanations, establishing canons for the evaluation of data, submitting their findings to publication inquiry, debate, and so on. Although at times they fell short (for instance by being particularly uncritical of witness reports from people of the higher socioeconomic classes), they nevertheless established bases that have continued to serve parapsychological research well. For instance, some of the findings from this early work, such as the percentage of people reporting hallucinations and their types, were replicated decades later (Bentall, 2000).

They favored field investigations over experimental research, but they also did careful case-study research with mediums (Gauld, 1968). Some of this research would certainly raise ethical concerns today, such as using lit matches and making incisions on the body of Mrs. Piper, perhaps history's most remarkable mental medium, to test her "trance." It is nonetheless interesting that imperviousness to fire and pain are taken as signs in other cultures of spirit possession (Cardena, Van Duijl, Weiner, & Terhune, 2009), and of course anaesthesia is a well known phenomenon of hypnosis (Patterson & Jensen, 2003). Scientific fashions change and in the USA the approach of investigators became far more experimental under the influential work of J. B. Rhine (Broughton, 1991), but a strong case can be made that anecdotes, case studies, experiments, and other forms of inquiry all contribute with their particular strengths and weaknesses to elucidate the nature of the elusive and capricious psi phenomena (cf. Pekala & Cardena, 2000). Reading *Immortal Longings* brings to mind the French saying *le plus*

ca change le plus ca le meme chose (the more things change, the more they remain the same), as some of the battles and arguments concerning the validity of psi are being almost exactly reproduced in our days: Spiritualism followers who blamed the SPR group of arrogance and closed-mindedness and critics who had not even taken the trouble to read the papers they were criticizing have their unworthy successors in our midst.

Immortal Longings is a handsome book and includes beautiful photos of Myers and a number of investigators, mediums, and even a celebrity (Stanley, the explorer, was a surprise to see), but its binding proved rather flimsy. The present reviewers had a copy each, but both copies, carefully handled, detached from the back spine in the same place almost immediately after they were handled. It is reasonable to suggest that this was caused by careless bookbinders rather than poltergeists. Hamilton's biography is competent and well informed, although Myers' personality remains opaque and does not seem to come alive in the way that William James does in Jacques Barzun's book *A Stroll with William James* (Barzun, 2002). Myers had the mixed blessing of being a contemporary of James. He likely benefited from their acquaintanceship and support by James, but the immense presence of the latter overshadows just about everyone who worked on psychology and parapsychology at the time. Nonetheless, they clearly came to us with very different gifts. James was the master phrase-maker and clear thinker that gave us panoramic overviews of where psychology was then and where it might go in the future. In contrast, with his orotund and baroque prose, Myers submitted a systematic grand theory of some of the most fascinating mental phenomena: creativity, dissociation, hypnosis, psi phenomena, and yes, even the possibility of survival. Although it has become commonplace to assert that grand theories in psychology passed their expiration time some time ago, Kelly et al. (2007) make a persuasive case that it may still serve us well to revisit Myers' notion of a subliminal consciousness.

This biography gives us a good introduction to both the man and his work, not least in the manner in which it shows how many thoughts that psychology historians have originally attributed to others (e.g., Jung's notions of an integrative function in the unconscious, and some of James' ideas) were probably inspired by the overlooked work of F. W. H. Myers. For a man whose university days were besmirched by an accusation of plagiarism, it is ironic that his life's work has so often been attributed to others. There is, however, a postscript to provide a double irony. Shortly after his death, and for some time after, automatic writing mediums across the globe began to receive communications purporting to come from the spirit of Myers, building up into an intricate and complex system of cross-correspondence. Was this really Myers, speaking from beyond the grave? It appears that the lingering question over Myers' authorial authenticity pursues him even in the Afterlife.

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