

POLTERGEIST PHENOMENA IN AMERICA

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The best-known poltergeist cases in America are, in general, characteristic of cases reported in all civilized countries for the past three or four centuries. According to Frank Podmore, poltergeist performances in modern times are a direct legacy from the witchcraft of the Middle Ages. Mysterious knocks and rappings are heard amidst crashing and banging, crockery and other objects are thrown about and broken without assignable cause, and in some cases appear to defy gravity. Bells are rung even after the wires are disconnected, mysterious fires break out, strange writings appear on walls. Often damage is done to property, and on rare occasions objects in transport injure the alleged agents. Usually the objects come with full force but alight gently. Disturbances occur when it would be a physical impossibility for the agents to produce them. The manifestations cease as suddenly as they began after days or weeks or months.

Educated and trustworthy eye-witnesses have testified to the reality of these mysterious disturbances. William James in his presidential address to the S. P. R. in 1894 took a charitable view of ghost and disturbance stories although his *judgment* remained suspended.

Among noted American cases are the T. B. Clarke case (California, 1874), the Mary Carrick case (Massachusetts, 1868), the Phelps case (Connecticut, 1850), and the Elwyn March case (Oregon, 1909). Three outstanding cases have been reported from Nova Scotia, Canada: the Esther Cox case (Amherst, 1878), the Windsor case (1907), and the Caledonia Mills case, near Antigonish (1922).

METHODS OF INVESTIGATION

Investigators are rarely able to witness poltergeist disturbances. As a rule they see the consequences—the havoc wrought. Thus they are reduced to obtaining the independent testimony of witnesses and studying any available documentary evidence. Often the alleged agent disclaims any association with the outbreaks. Unfortunately, there is little evidence that objects were seen to *start* in motion.

The witnesses are often respected professional men or highly-regarded business men. They could hardly risk serious misrepresentations in their own communities.

Frequently investigators have detected conscious trickery in American poltergeist phenomena. But conscious trickery is not an adequate explanation for all the facts. Sometimes trickery follows what had earlier been regarded as genuine supernormal phenomena—especially when pressure is exerted on the agent to repeat the manifestations.

Writing in 1911, Professor Hyslop declared that while the services of the conjuror had been of inestimable value in cases of professional frauds, the conjuror does not touch the real nature of the phenomena. The conjuror, who knows nothing about hysteria and dissociation, resists the conception of anything but trickery when the facts externally show the same characteristics as fraud.

Dr. Walter Franklin Prince agreed with Professor Hyslop that the first condition to any intelligent view of poltergeist phenomena was the psychological approach.

Dr. Nandor Fodor has employed the methods of psychoanalysis to poltergeist cases.

Mr. W. H. Salter's analysis of adolescent agents in English cases applies equally well to similar American cases.

Mr. G. W. Lambert has advanced the theory that physical forces may initiate poltergeist phenomena and that the occurrences "favor" coastal regions, especially tidal estuaries. Of 54 cases he lists, nearly half of them are

within about three miles of tidal water. It is a curious coincidence that many of the most important American cases have also occurred near tidal water.