

# Magicians who endorsed psychic phenomena.

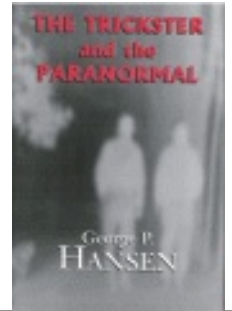
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## Magicians Who Endorsed Psychic Phenomena

By George P. Hansen

Conjurors have long played a role in psychical research. Many people are under the impression that magicians are total skeptics when it comes to psychic phenomena. It comes as a surprise to many (including some magicians), to learn that this is by no means the case. A number of the most prominent magicians in history have endorsed the reality of psychic phenomena. A surprising roster of modern-day conjurors also have positive views.

In this article I will list favorable opinions and comments of conjurors from the past and

present. Some of these are prominent figures included in any standard history of magic while others are not quite so well known. The end of the article includes a list of original sources. These may be of interest to historians of magic and other scholars. Many more references could have been included, but these give the views I cite in this article.

Some magicians' positive statements regarding psychic phenomena might be looked upon with some skepticism. In the mentalist literature, performers are frequently urged to claim genuine abilities even if they don't believe in them. In other instances, magicians might make positive statements for publicity purposes. Such practices have led some to doubt any positive opinions magicians claim on the matter.

There is considerable controversy regarding statements made by mentalists like Joseph Dunninger, David Hoy, and Kreskin. However, I have not yet come across anything that would lead me to doubt the statements and views cited in this article. They seem to truly reflect the honest opinions of those stating them. If anyone has contrary information, I would much like to know.

### **Historical Figures**

It is well known that J. Nevil Maskelyne reaped much publicity for his attacks on mediums. In fact, Maskelyne and Cooke began their rise to fame with performances of an anti-spiritualist demonstration. Maskelyne testified in court against

several Spiritualists. However, in an article in the *Pall Mall Gazette* Maskelyne described witnessing table turning that he thought was genuine and said “*myself and a few friends . . . produced movements of the table . . . I believe, in my own mind, that it must have been some psychic or nerve force which . . . neutralized the laws of gravitation*” (page 5). He emphatically denied that spirits were involved however. Thus he rejected a supernatural explanation but accepted the natural physical reality of the phenomena.

Professor Hoffmann (Angelo Lewis), author of *Modern Magic* and other classic texts, expressed some skepticism regarding psychic phenomena. But he said that he thought that certain slate-writing phenomena of mediums were probably genuine and not all due to trickery. He was consulted by investigators of the Society for Psychical Research and sat in on a number of seances with Mr. Eglinton, a spiritualist medium. His published report was detailed, balanced, and could serve as a model for today’s magician-investigators.

Harry Kellar has also written of his experiences with Eglinton; Kellar observed him levitate. Kellar too rejected a spiritualistic interpretation but accepted the physical reality of the event. Kellar’s account indicated that the levitation occurred in darkness, thus the strength of his account must be evaluated accordingly.

Samuel Bellachini was the Court Conjuror for Emperor William I at

Berlin. Bellachini investigated the controversial American medium Henry Slade. The sittings were not only held in darkness, but some were in full daylight. Bellachini was convinced that the results were not due to trickery.

The famous historical medium, Eusapia Palladino, readily admitted herself that she used trickery when she could. Skeptics have often thus dismissed positive reports of her phenomena. But no less than Howard Thurston believed in some of her results and said so in the *New York Times*. Thurston was nevertheless well aware of her trickery. Given that someone of Thurston's stature endorsed the phenomena, perhaps skeptics and investigators should reevaluate the policy of automatically dismissing all positive evidence when trickery is found in other instances. Thomas Worthington produced a short biography of Thurston in which he described a premonition of Thurston himself. Worthington mentioned that Thurston had a deep interest in Eastern philosophy.

First-hand accounts from Jean Eugene Robert-Houdin are difficult to come by. A brief statement of Robert-Houdin's was reprinted in a book on animal magnetism by Edwin Lee. Robert-Houdin attested to the clairvoyant ability of Alexis Didier. Will Goldston's book *Crystal Gazing*, also reprinted statements of Robert-Houdin describing his experiences with Didier.

Samri Baldwin, known as "The White Mahatma" may have been the first magician to do a stage escape from handcuffs. He wrote one book

titled *Spirit Mediums Exposed*. In another, *The Secrets of Mahatma Land Explained*, which also explained spiritualistic tricks, he stated that he did believe in psychic forces. He made a point of saying that he did not use them in his performances though. Some might consider the statements of Baldwin more suspect than others mentioned in this article because he performed as a mentalist. But in *Magic: A Pictorial History of Conjurers in the Theatre*, David Price noted that Baldwin was associated with a Spiritualist church near the end of his life. It seems most likely that Baldwin's statements reflected his true opinions.

Henry Ridgely Evans was a journalist and magic historian who wrote several books exposing fakery of mediums. He too believed in telepathy and said so in his *Hours With the Ghosts*.

David Abbott wrote *Behind the Scenes With the Mediums*, a classic expose. He was involved with the American Society for Psychical Research investigation of Mrs. Blake, a trumpet medium. Mrs. Blake gave Abbott details about deceased relatives which she had no way of knowing. Henry Hardin (E.A. Parsons), a magic inventor and music professor, was also involved and also received strikingly accurate information.

Father Carlos de Heredia was a Jesuit and also an amateur magician. As a boy, he was able to study under Herrmann. In his book *Spiritism and Common Sense* he explained tricks of the mediums, and he too acknowledged that some

psychical phenomena do exist.

John Mulholland authored the book *Beware Familiar Spirits*. Mulholland was generally skeptical, but at the end of the book he included a chapter with accounts of paranormal occurrences from others. Among those was one by Fulton Oursler describing a premonition involving himself and Howard Thurston. In a biography by Oursler's son, it was noted that "*Fulton did have prophetic dreams all his life.*" Oursler was an amateur magician, and a well known editor and writer. One of his best known works was *The Greatest Story Ever Told*. Some of his magical writings appeared under the name Samri Frikell, including a book *Spirit Mediums Exposed*.

Another writer who dabbled in magic was Lewis Carroll (Charles Lutwidge Dodgson). He had a strong interest in spiritualism and psychical research and stated that not all the phenomena could be explained by trickery. He was one of the charter members of the Society for Psychical Research.

Julien Proskauer served as president of the S.A.M. and also wrote two books attacking fake spiritualist mediums; one was titled *The Dead do not Talk*. In his other book, *Spook Crooks!*, he noted that "*there have been some inexplicable phenomena during seances.*"

Eric Dingwall was an honorary vice president of the Magic Circle when he died in 1986 (see John Booth's column of August 1988). In the early part of this century, he investigated numerous mediums and published many journal articles

on his investigations. Dingwall came to rather favorable conclusions regarding St. Joseph of Copertino (a saint who levitated), and for Daniel Dunglas Home (an extraordinary medium). He also has written an extended discussion of Eusapia Palladino. These are recounted and evaluated in his most appropriately titled books, *Very Peculiar People* and *Some Human Oddities*. Later in life he wrote some scathing attacks on psychical researchers, but he did not explain some of his own extraordinary observations.

Will Goldston wrote more than 50 books (e.g., *Exclusive Magical Secrets*), and founded the Magicians' Club of London. It is not as well known that Goldston was heavily involved in encounters with the psychic. In his *Secrets of Famous Illusionists* he describes a number of table levitations he witnessed and also mentioned that he himself practiced automatic writing. He took part in investigations of the medium Rudi Schneider.

The eminent psychic researcher, Walter Franklin Prince, was an amateur conjuror and published a book titled *Noted Witnesses for Psychic Occurrences*. The titled well describes the contents. Prince reprinted letters and other accounts from such persons as Mark Twain, Luther Burbank, and Charles Dickens (an amateur conjuror). The magicians included Henry Ridgely Evans, John Nevil Maskelyne, and Fulton Oursler.

Wallace Lee, for whom Ring 199 is named, was a friend of J.B. Rhine, the father of modern

parapsychology. Lee had a chance to observe firsthand some of the early tests of Rhine. He wrote about his involvement in *The Linking Ring* and declared that he saw no flaws in Rhine's procedures.

Second part of article: *The Linking Ring*,

September 1990, Volume 70, No. 9, pp. 63-65, 109.

## Magicians Who Endorsed Psychic Phenomena

By George P. Hansen

### **Modern Day Magicians**

As we have seen, many magicians of the past have endorsed the reality of psychic phenomena. Among them were some of the foremost members of the profession. Many of these were active in exposing fraudulent mediumship and psychic trickery. Even today this tradition continues.

The renowned writers, Walter B. Gibson and his wife Litzka, are two modern-day figures who have had much involvement with the psychic realm. They co-authored a number of books on divination methods and psychic development. In their book *The Mystic and Occult Arts*, they recount in detail a number of their own personal psychic experiences. Walter was a member of the American Society for Psychical Research.

Daryl Bem is a professor of psychology at Cornell University and also a mentalist. He was



featured in *Psychology Today*, March 1984, for his use of magic in teaching. Recently he helped prepare a revision of *Introduction to Psychology*, one of the largest selling introductory textbooks for college courses in psychology. The section on parapsychology gives a favorable view of modern ESP experiments.

The name of Uri Geller often sparks a dispute among magicians. In 1975 Abb Dickson and Artur Zorka investigated Geller. Their report described events which they could not explain. Several skeptics have sought to discredit the account by writing of second- and third-hand rumors of conversations with Abb Dickson, supposedly indicating discrepancies. I personally have spoken with Dickson, and he affirmed the essential accuracy of the report and said that he did know how Geller accomplished the feats observed during their investigation.

Magic historian and biographer William Rauscher has had a long involvement with psychical research. He has not only written biographies of John Calvert and Servais LeRoy, but he was instrumental in helping with the book *The Psychic Mafia* which described the shenanigans of fake mediums. *The Spiritual Frontier* describes his activities in the psychic realm giving both skeptical and favorable views of various phenomena. That book, as well as *Arthur Ford: The Man Who Talked with the Dead* (written with Allen Spraggett), give considerable information on the controversy surrounding the Houdini code (the

message Houdini was to have communicated to his wife after death).

Mentalist and magician Ormond McGill is well known for his books on hypnosis and mentalism. He was featured on the cover of the February 1989 *Linking Ring*. Among magicians however, it is not so known that he has traveled extensively in some of the most exotic parts of the world investigating psychic, mystical, and religious phenomena. His writings display a highly positive evaluation of some of his encounters.

In the September through November 1985 issues of *The Linking Ring*, anthropologist-magician Howard Higgins described some of his experiences among the Tahltan Indians in northwestern British Columbia. He did observe some magic tricks but also reported a strikingly accurate premonition by one of the Indians. He was forced to conclude that there was likely no normal explanation for it.

The San Francisco Bay Area is home to Loyd Auerbach, a well-known proponent of psychic research and author of a book on investigations. Auerbach has served as president of an S.A.M. assembly. He has investigated a number of hauntings and has made very positive statements about parapsychology.

### **A Scientific Poll of Magicians**

In 1981 Polly Birdsell, owner of California Magic & Novelty Co. in Pleasant Hill (on the eastern side of the San Francisco Bay Area), completed a masters thesis on the

opinions of magicians and the relation of the occult to modern magic. She explored how magicians view their art in relation to the supernatural. For part of her project, she polled a group of magicians and found that 82% of them expressed a positive view regarding the existence of ESP. Her thesis has recently been published in book form.

### **Magician Editors**

Magicians who are open minded toward psychic occurrences are found in some surprising places. Donald Michael Kraig, editor of *Fate*, a popular magazine dealing with paranormal topics, has been a professional magician as has Mark Chorvinsky, editor of *Strange*, a magazine devoted to what is known as "Fortean." Marcello Truzzi, who holds a neutral position about psychic phenomena edits *Zetetic Scholar*, an occasionally produced journal devoted to scientific controversies on the paranormal. Truzzi has been active in the Psychic Entertainers Association and has served as Territorial Representative for the I.B.M. He is a sociologist and has authored a number of important papers regarding the psi controversy.

### **Summary and Concluding Remarks**

It should not be surprising that so many magicians have and do accept the genuineness of psychic occurrences. After all, we magicians are mostly like normal people! Recent polls have shown that over half of the general population

believe in ESP. Clearly there is a disagreement, not only among magicians, but among scientists and government bodies as well. Physics Nobel laureate, Brian Josephson, is very positively inclined toward the existence of ESP; whereas physicist Stephen Hawking is critical. The U.S. Army Research Institute commissioned a study which came to rather negative conclusions about parapsychology, yet a project of the U.S.

Congressional Office of Technology Assessment came to much more positive decision. Readers wanting more information about these two reports might consult the January and October 1989 issues of the *Journal of the American Society for Psychical Research* (the journal can be found in many large college and university libraries).

For well over one hundred years, scientists have been debating the existence of paranormal phenomena such as extrasensory perception (ESP) and psychokinesis (PK). A recent example appears in the December 1987 issue of *Behavioral and Brain Sciences*, a psychology journal devoted to dialogue and debate. Over 100 pages were given to parapsychology with more than 50 commentators. Several of the participants in this scientific debate were magicians.

Readers interested in other writings on the role of magicians in parapsychology might wish to look at an article in the March-April 1985 issue of *Parapsychology Review* and another in the January 1990 *Journal of the American Society for Psychical Research*. Also, Marcello Truzzi,

professor of sociology at Eastern Michigan University (Ypsilanti, Michigan), has an extensive report in preparation which I hope will soon see print.

Most skeptics are unfamiliar with the best scientific evidence for psychic phenomena such as that in the *Journal of Parapsychology*. Most believers are unaware of the strongest arguments against the reality. It will likely be a while before the scientific controversy is resolved, but in any event, magicians will undoubtedly play a role.

Author's Note: I thank William Rauscher and Lupe Ah Chu for comments and help with the preparation of this article.

Editor's Note: George Hansen is a civil engineer who has been employed in parapsychology research laboratories for eight years. He has been a member of the I.B.M. since 1983.

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