

PROCEEDINGS

OF THE

Society for Psychical Research

PART XCV.

IN MEMORY OF

SIR WILLIAM FLETCHER BARRETT, F.R.S.

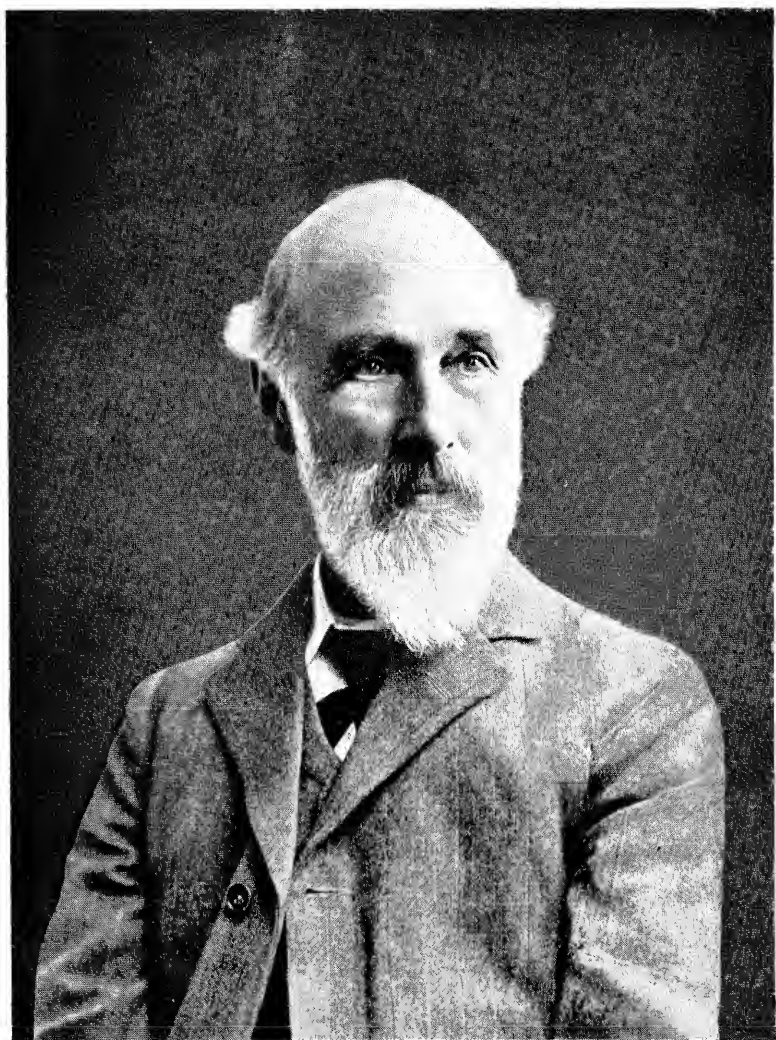
IN the death of Sir William Barrett, which occurred quite suddenly on May 26th, at the age of 81, our Society has to mourn the loss of one of its past presidents and the last remaining member of its original Council. He was, moreover, not only a member of the first Council but very definitely a founder of the Society—one may say *the* founder, for I believe the first idea of founding a Society at all was his. It was the stimulating effect of his zeal and energy that largely influenced Sidgwick, Myers and Gurney to renewed interest in investigations in which they, like himself, had done a considerable amount of work in previous years, though often with disappointing results. I remember his coming to Cambridge and reading to us a large budget of cases, experimental and spontaneous, collected by himself (largely by means of appeals through the press) and pointing to what we now call telepathy.¹ This must, I think, have been in the autumn of 1881 and the visit was, I suspect, the occasion of Sidgwick's writing to a friend on Sept. 4th, 1881, "The great event that has occurred to me is that my interest in Spiritualism has been revived." The formation of a

¹ He had appealed for "trustworthy evidence... of cases of the direct action of one mind upon another giving rise to an apparent transfusion of thought or feeling... or of cases where... perception may seem to occur independent of the ordinary channels of sensation."

Society was under consideration that autumn and winter, and Professor Barrett, as he then was, was engaged in stirring up interest in the idea in various quarters. It was he who enlisted in its favour Professor Balfour Stewart and, directly or indirectly, other distinguished early members, as well as some of the leading Spiritualists of the time. As Professor Balfour Stewart said in his Presidential address in 1885 when giving a brief survey of the growth of the Society, "A preliminary conference was convened by Professor Barrett (whom we honour as our founder) on the 5th and 6th of January 1882 . . . The Society was next formally constituted on the 20th of February." Though it was decided that Professor Sidgwick should be the first President, Sir William Barrett was naturally made a Vice-President, and it was he who, in the capacity of honorary secretary to the committee on Thought Reading, read at the first general meeting the first paper contributed to the Society and published in its *Proceedings*.

His interest has continued unabated ever since. He has been a diligent attendant at meetings of the Council, notwithstanding the distance he had to travel when Professor of Physics at the Royal College of Science for Dublin—a position he held from 1873 to 1910—and notwithstanding the strain which his increasing deafness must of late years have put on him in discussions; and he has been the moving spirit in various developments of the Society's work and organisation. Thus in February 1884, the *Journal* was started on his proposal as a means of communication between the Council and the members and associates of the Society, as well as of members with each other; and for the first year of its existence he acted as editor.

In the same year Professor Barrett, drawn to America by the meeting of the British Association at Montreal, was able to interest important men of science in the United States in psychical research and to give the impetus required for the foundation of a Society for Psychical Research there. It was established in January 1885 with Professor Simon Newcomb as its first President. Sir



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Research, in the Home University Library, though necessarily somewhat out of date now, is a model for brief but clear and popular treatment of a complicated subject, and he produced several other books connected with our work.¹

But I think what most gave him force as a kind of prophet was his great eagerness to stimulate enquiry and to interest people, with an instinctive perception of what would generally interest them. Eagerness such as his had, of course, its drawbacks, and may have sometimes caused him to bring forward interesting cases before they had been fully investigated and made as complete evidentially as possible. But, on the other hand, his keenness brought him into touch with cases which we might not otherwise have heard of, and enabled him to stimulate and encourage friends to carry out experiments which might not otherwise have taken place. It was, for instance, partly due to his encouragement that Miss Ramsden and Miss Miles carried out their valuable experiments in telepathy at a distance.

I am not attempting to give any history of Sir William's interest in Psychical Research or of the work in it done by him, for he himself told us about it in the paper he read to the Society less than a year ago—in June 1924—on "Some Reminiscences of Fifty Years of Psychical Research,"² and what I should have to say would be largely repetition. But a few words should be said of his scientific work unconnected with psychical research. He was, as he in fact tells us in the paper just referred to, Tyndall's assistant for several years (1862-1867), and it was in Tyndall's laboratory at the Royal Institution that his well-known observations on sensitive flames were first made. Later in his own laboratory at Dublin he made other investigations and discoveries. Among them were discoveries of alloys of iron, at least one of which has proved of great value. He also made observations on the curious behaviour of iron near the critical magnetic

¹ *On the Threshold of a New World of Thought*, 1908; *On Creative Thought*, 1910; *A Study of Swedenborg*, 1912.

² *Proceedings*, vol. xxxiv. p. 275.

William Barrett's own account of the work he did so successfully in actively interesting people sufficiently to bring about this result may be found in the first volume of our *Journal* (pp. 172-6). He maintained his interest in the work on the other side of the Atlantic to the end of his life, corresponding on the subject with friends and fellow workers both in the United States and in Canada. Recently he has taken a keen personal interest in the foundation and prospects of the new Boston Society.

His never-failing desire to stimulate interest in psychical research and promote associations for collective inquiry was manifested on the very day he died by his taking the chair at a group meeting in the Society's rooms, arranged by Mr. Trethewy, with a view to "collecting information about the practice of Spiritualism in foreign countries."

In earlier days, before the foundation of the Society, it was this same desire to interest the world in the subject of our inquiry and to draw other workers into this field of investigation, which prompted him to read a paper about it before the British Association at Glasgow in 1876, in which he urged the formation of a committee of the Association to examine the evidence for the reality of the alleged phenomena. It annoyed some men of science a good deal at the time, and excited somewhat violent controversy in the Press. But it undoubtedly had a considerable effect in promoting the interest in psychical research which its author desired to create.

There can be no doubt that Sir William Barrett had in a remarkable degree a power of stirring up in others interest in subjects which interested himself. Both in conversation and as a lecturer he was very successful in this, not only in psychical research, but also, I believe, in experimental physics, the subject with which he was professionally engaged during the greater part of his life. He had considerable power of exposition, both as a lecturer and as a writer. His style in writing is lucid and pleasant, and his arrangement of his matter clear and instructive. His little book on Psychical

point and investigations into entoptic vision. He was elected a Fellow of the Royal Society in 1899.

Sir William's contributions to our *Proceedings* and *Journal* have been numerous, and deal with many, indeed most, departments of psychical research. Hypnotism, Telepathy and Telergy, the physical phenomena of Spiritualism, Poltergeists, "Reichenbach phenomena" with the possibility of a magnetic sense, supernormal communication through motor automatism, all claimed his attention. His longest and probably most important papers in *Proceedings* are the two *On the so called Divining Rod*, published in Volumes XIII. and XV. They constitute a treatise on the subject and have made him an authority on it. In 1900 his provisional conclusion from these investigations (expressed in Vol. XV., p. 311) was that the dowser's success arises "from some kind of transcendental discernment possessed by his subconscious self"—from clairvoyance in fact—which through subliminal suggestion causes the automatic muscular contractions that move the dowsing rod. This provisional conclusion seems to have developed through further reflection into a firm conviction; and last year, in the "Reminiscences" already referred to, he says "I believe that it [*i.e.* dowsing] affords the easiest and most conclusive evidence that a supernormal perceptive power—akin to clairvoyance—exists." We understand, however, that search is still being made in Germany for normal physical or physiological explanations of the phenomena of dowsing.

On May 6th, at the last meeting of the Society before his death, Sir William was the reader of a paper "On an Enquiry into a Remarkable Case," and the *Journal* for May which appeared almost on the day of his death contains an obituary notice of Dr. Sydney Alritz of Upsala, in whose work in hypnotism he took great interest. He died, therefore, as he would have wished, very much in harness—working for psychical research to the last.

In his private life Sir William Barrett was a man of warm and enduring friendships. He had a devoted sister who kept house for him for many years, and his latest years were rendered very happy by his marriage in 1916

to Mrs. Florence Willie, M.D., the distinguished surgeon and gynecologist.

In conclusion, it only remains to say, that those of us who, like myself, believe that our Society has been and is a valuable instrument in promoting investigation in fields neglected by orthodox science cannot but feel much gratitude to Sir William Barrett to whom its existence is so largely due, and who also began "the accumulation of evidence which bids fair sooner or later to place telepathy among the established truths of science." When that forecast, quoted from his Presidential address to the Society in 1904,¹ comes true, as I cannot doubt it will, Sir William Barrett will undoubtedly and deservedly be regarded as a courageous pioneer in perhaps the most important branch of human discovery.

ELEANOR MILDRED SIDGWICK.

¹ *Proceedings*, vol. xviii., pp. 241-2.