

BOOK REVIEWS

THE ELUSIVE SCIENCE: ORIGINS OF EXPERIMENTAL PSYCHICAL RESEARCH by Seymour H. Mauskopf and Michael R. McVaugh (with an afterword by J. B. and L. E. Rhine). Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980. Pp. xvi + 368. \$24.50, cloth.

Most books on parapsychology are written either to promote the field in some way or else to attack it. This book is a notable exception. The authors are two historians of science with no previous familiarity with the field, whose interest was first aroused by having J. B. Rhine as a neighbor, for Dr. Mauskopf is at Duke and Dr. McVaugh is at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill. In due course they became fascinated by parapsychology as a case study in the emergence of a new, if controversial, science. The present volume is the outcome of some ten years of delving into archives and documents. The period on which they have chosen to focus spans the inter-war years with special emphasis on the developments that took place between the publication of Rhine's *Extra-Sensory Perception* in April 1934 and the publication of *Extra-Sensory Perception after Sixty Years* in June 1940 in which Rhine and his associates attempted to meet the criticisms their work had generated. Mauskopf and McVaugh make it plain in their preface that they are not concerned to adjudicate parapsychological claims, but solely to trace the impact of these developments on the scientific and academic establishments of the time and, more especially, on American academic psychology.

By adhering strictly to the historiographical approach, the authors enjoy a freedom and a neutrality that is denied alike to the advocates and to the critics of the field. On the one hand, as they put it, "We see no reason why one should conclude, as some critics would assert, that every report of successful parapsychological experimentation should be called into question." At the same time, what the findings imply, whether they are "freaks of random distribution or the product of some as yet indescribable 'para-normal faculty'" is, they submit, "not yet decidable." The Rhines, who contribute a brief commentary following the authors' own epilogue, find such neutrality disturbing. They lament that, in their pursuit of scholarly detachment, the authors somehow lose the "content and spirit of the field" and present in its place an account that is "far too flat and pedestrian to reflect reality." However, reality can, after all, be viewed from more than one angle. We can always read the writing of the Rhines themselves or of J. G. Pratt if we want to know how things looked from the insider's point

of view. What lends the present volume its unique strength and authority is precisely its lack of partisanship, although one senses that the authors' personal sympathies are with the parapsychologists rather than with their opponents.

If this book has a hero, it is unquestionably J. B. Rhine. But for his singleminded dedication and his firmness in the face of pressures from different directions it is doubtful if the transformation of psychical research as a hunting-ground for the curious and the dilettante into parapsychology as an academic discipline and an experimental science would have taken effect. It is instructive to compare Rhine with that other great champion of parapsychology in America, who figures prominently in this book, Gardner Murphy. Murphy was, without doubt, the more eminent intellectually of the two and he was, of course, far more influential in the psychological community (he was president of the APA in 1944/45); but his interests were too broad and his attitude to parapsychology too cautious and low-key to have become its leader, and he was, in fact, quite content to play second fiddle to Rhine. The book also helps us to understand why the immediate precursors of Rhine failed to preempt his revolution. Several of them were engaged in card-guessing tests; moreover, Ina Jephson of the London SPR was using a clairvoyant technique and she had the help of the great R. A. Fisher with her statistical analysis. Then there was J. E. Coover at Stanford, perhaps the most skeptical investigator ever to spend a large part of his career doing parapsychological experiments, George Estabrooks at Harvard, and a number of others at American universities whom we meet here in Chapter 3. None, however, had the determination or staying power of Rhine. Rhine had, of course, the good fortune to be at a university whose president was strongly sympathetic to psychical research and where the head of the psychology department, where Rhine was employed, was William McDougall, who saw parapsychology as a weapon in his struggle against the behaviorists. Furthermore, Rhine knew how to go over the heads of the academic establishment and appeal to a wider public on whose support he could count, to private benefactors, or to science journalists like Waldemar Kaempffert of the *New York Times*.

But quite apart from his qualities of leadership or his advantages in being in the right place at the right time, Rhine had astounding luck. His *Extra-Sensory Perception*, published originally as a learned monograph by the Boston SPR, but soon to win him world-wide acclaim, would never have made anything like the same impact had it not been for the extraordinary fact that, among his early entourage, Rhine had at least eight individuals capable of averaging scores of 8,

9, 10 or more hits per run over hundreds or even thousands of trials. Nothing comparable has ever been recorded before or since; and even if we discount some of the results as being due to the relative informality of the conditions, it still remains a major mystery. The trouble was that it fed expectations that could not be sustained, and the ensuing disappointment rebounded against the field in general. Thus the authors reckon that already by 1940 psychologists at some fifty American universities or colleges had experimented with ESP cards and most of them had failed to obtain evidence for ESP. And this is hardly surprising when we learn that, at the Duke Laboratory itself, high scorers were already hard to come by by the time *Extra-Sensory Perception* had appeared. To some extent this was compensated for by new studies designed to correlate ESP scoring with various psychological variables involving personality traits, attitudes, etc., but such an oblique approach could scarcely satisfy the critics. It is not without cause that the authors call their book *The Elusive Science*. The truth is that the key problem, how to produce the phenomena we wish to study, still eludes us. Parapsychology has made some definite advances since Rhine first went into action and we have become more widely recognized, but the repeatable experiment that alone could clinch this recognition still, alas, escapes us.

It was not only with the academic psychologists that the new experimental parapsychology had to contend but also with the psychical researchers, many of whom were by no means favorably disposed towards the statistical and laboratory approach to the paranormal. I read with special interest Chapter 8 in which the authors discuss the position of the psychical research societies of the period. In 1925 the American SPR was taken over by its spiritualist wing, more especially by the followers of the medium Margery, perhaps the most divisive figure in the history of parapsychology—at any rate before Geller. As a result, those who were concerned to uphold strict scientific standards turned to Walter F. Prince who set up an independent Boston SPR. It was Prince who encouraged the young Rhine and under whose auspices *Extra-Sensory Perception* was published but, in the very year of its publication, he died and thereafter the Boston SPR led a precarious existence until 1941, when a reformation at the ASPR in New York, in which Gardner Murphy took a leading part, made its existence no longer necessary.

The London SPR, too, suffered from various factional antagonisms but there was some support for the new experimental approach from, among others, Tyrrell, Carington, Saltmarsh, and Thouless. Undoubtedly, however, the most active experimenter of this period in Britain was the mathematician, S. G. Soal. In the light of recent

revelations it is tantalizing to read about his earlier career. At one time he quarreled with the SPR leadership and allied himself with Harry Price. His persistent failure to replicate the Duke results led him to become suspicious of Rhine's success, but his statements on the topic were so contradictory that it was difficult for his contemporaries to know where he stood.

From our present vantage-point it may seem as if the authors have given too much prominence to the Rhinean school at the expense of other developments in psychical research that are dealt with here only superficially. But it must be understood that the book is written from a particular perspective and is concerned above all with the changing status of parapsychology as an aspiring science. There are those who will protest that the question of status is, after all, of secondary importance and that what alone ultimately matters is the truth, or otherwise, of the parapsychological claims. Rhine himself seems to have realized early on that parapsychology could never fit comfortably into any existing academic niche, still less become a mere subdivision of psychology. He was resigned to the fact that for a long time to come it would have to be content to plough a lonely furrow. Yet, if experimental parapsychology is ever to flourish in our society the good will of the scientific and academic community is vitally important and we can surely learn a lot from our past experience by reading this informative book. No doubt many of the facts with which it deals will be familiar to many readers of this journal but I do not know of anywhere else where they have been dealt with so systematically, at such length, and yet so readably as here; and for this alone we should be grateful to Drs. Mauskopf and McVaugh. One could even say that it is a sign of the growing prestige and maturity of the field that it should have attracted this sort of attention from two such historians.

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ESP AND PSYCHOKINESIS: A PHILOSOPHICAL EXAMINATION by Stephen Braude. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1979. Pp. 277. \$19.50, cloth.

This book is the first full-length original examination of parapsychology from a philosophical viewpoint since C. D. Broad's monu-