

THE WIDOW OF BORLEY: A PSYCHICAL INVESTIGATION by Robert Wood.
Duckworth, London, 1992. vii + 168 pp. £16.99.

The main corpus of this book will come as a revelation to many who know only of Marianne Foyster and her husband, the Rev. Lionel A. Foyster, as principal characters in the reputed haunting of Borley Rectory while they were in residence from 1930 to 1935. In all the published literature prior to 1979, little emerged as to their personalities and the full extent of their motivation in the 'haunt'. After the death of Lionel in 1945, Marianne seemingly vanished. It was not until some years later that Trevor Hall traced her movements to America. Then in 1958 and again in 1979 she consented to be interviewed in Canada, at which latter date she was close on 80. With the appearance of "The Alleged Haunting of Borley Rectory" by Iris Owen and Paulene Mitchell in the *Journal of the SPR* for September 1979 (pp.149-162), her biographical confessions came under close scrutiny.

Robert Wood's book is replete with incriminating details as to her character, thereby severely damaging, if not destroying, her reliability as a witness to the apparent phenomena at Borley. Lionel Foyster is shown as a pathetic figure who connived in her deceptions both during their time at the Rectory and after.

With the author's strictly factual documentation on Marianne Foyster's life there can be little quarrel, although there is still a large measure of debatable supposition with regard to her husband. It is with much in the opening chapters of the book, which form a preamble to the main text, that serious issue must be taken.

Mr Wood betrays a starkly hostile prejudice about psychical research in general, lacing his more particular observations with extremely dismissive remarks. Three examples will suffice here. He calls the SPR a "farcical organisation" when he notes internal divisions in the past. He doesn't seem to appreciate that the Society does not hold or express corporate views, and although grants are at times made to assist projects it is in no way analogous to a research department. There is the particularly ill-considered statement, "Psychical researchers seem to have great difficulty discriminating between an experience and its interpretation . . . many of them appear to have no idea of what constitutes proof." No names are cited to support this contention. All are by implication lumped together, the dabblers, the self-styled and those well qualified to examine evidence critically. Yet time and time again in the literature of the SPR and comparable bodies we can readily find an acute awareness of the difference between raw experience and its decipherment. This is what proper research is mainly all about.

When he complains that no researchers have taken account of "patterns of local folklore" in dealing with the Borley case, the author overstates what is largely true. However, it is a pity he did not refer to the Owen and Mitchell report, which he had read. They remarked "there was scarcely a village in the neighbourhood without its local ghost story, and many boasted of more than one".

On pages 15-19 he reflects on the motives of the Rev. Guy E. Smith and his wife Mabel in contacting the *Daily Mirror* for help in investigating disturbing

incidents in the Rectory. They and their maid alleged an inexplicable light, whisperings, footsteps, etc. The Rev. Smith held the living for eighteen months from October 1928. The couple lived in the Rectory until July 1929 and then ran the parish from Long Melford for the remaining nine months. They wrote to the *Mirror* in June 1929. As a result a reporter, Mr Wall, and Harry Price arrived on the scene.

Robert Wood marshals arguments for what he considers the Smiths' ulterior motive in writing to the paper. His thesis is that they "must have wanted" publicity so that Mrs Smith could watch at first hand a reporter at work in the house, so giving her material for her projected novel, *Murder at the Parsonage*. However, it is extremely unlikely that they sought publicity. They were getting enough of that locally, where haunting stories were well established long before their arrival. It is more reasonable to think that they hoped that a qualified psychical researcher, *not* a reporter as Wood states, would make a confidential investigation. They could well have hoped also that he would find a normal explanation for the disconcerting events. That would have not only given them peace of mind but enabled them to scotch local gossip. It needs to be appreciated that Mr Smith's day-to-day pastoral duties were being jeopardized by the tales. The maid was doubtless spreading them abroad. They were certainly naïve in not foreseeing the likely consequences of their letter. Their lack of nous in this respect is not as incredible as the author finds. Such naïvety is common to all manner of people.

It is not now possible genuinely to determine why they chose the *Mirror* to make their appeal. For all we know they could have been regular readers of that paper, and the tabloid press had always shown a marked interest in reports of the supernatural. Mr Wood questions why the Rev. Smith did not seek help from his bishop or the archdeacon, who would presumably have arranged an exorcism. Yet this would have attracted a wider publicity that I suggest they wanted to avoid. In any event Mr Smith had been recently installed in the living, his very first, and to have written to his superiors could well have rocked the clerical boat.

But the key question in all this is Mrs Smith's thriller. There is seemingly nothing on record to show she was contemplating writing her novel in June 1929. In fact, the earliest indication that she was planning to write it only occurs in correspondence with Harry Price *ten years later*, around the time of her husband's death. That she may have intended to utilize tales of Borley hauntings, including the 'murder' of the Rev. Harry Bull, a story invented by his sisters, is of course possible, but we have absolutely no idea of just what the plot of the book was going to be. Insinuations will not do.

In his chapter, "Harry and the Poltergeists", Mr Wood begins with a potted biography of Harry Price. In the main it is fair enough, but he plants in the reader's mind reasons for suspecting Price's veracity, such as his cover story for his parental background and the remark allegedly made by him of the general public, "They don't want the *debunk*, they want the *bunk*, and that is what I'll give them". Surely chapter and verse should have been given for this. If true, to know its context would be important, but it seems that any stick is good enough to beat the dog with. All of us in the SPR must by now be well aware of Price's self-importance and his flair for publicity (so annoying to

many academics). He would have qualified well for what Colin Wilson styled 'a Right Man'. But here again we have the oft-repeated accusation that he blatantly fabricated evidence. In the following chapter he is called "an astute and agreeable old fraudster". We do need to remind ourselves after all the controversy that although suspicions linger that on several occasions he may have cheated there is nothing that would stand up in a court of law. That he sometimes misrepresented and exaggerated some at least of his material can be much better argued. In fairness, in his Borley volumes he frequently indicated caution about some of the events narrated.

The author alludes to the testimony of a reporter (Mr Sutton) that he caught Price cheating at Borley. There is no mention of the close analysis of this episode in the SPR's *Proceedings* (Parts 186 & 201), which cannot be said to have resolved all doubts. That Price distanced himself from the 'haunting' from the summer of 1929 until October 1931 when the Foysters moved into the Rectory is far from confirming his exposure. It isn't at all "curious". As the late Robert Hastings pointed out, within days of the alleged incident he was ill from a heart attack. He suffered from angina. From November 1929 until January 1930 he was fully engaged in weekly experiments with the physical medium Rudi Schneider. The Smiths finally left Borley for Norfolk in April 1930, having shut up the Rectory long before; in fact in July 1929, a month after getting in touch with the *Mirror*. In mid-summer 1930 Price was briefly in Borley and Sudbury collecting information.

We are told that at no time did he believe the Rectory was haunted, but this needs qualification. While he had grave doubts at first, especially accusing Marianne Foyster of being a cheat, he was later more disposed to accept her testimony. It was her husband who more than anyone else convinced Price that there were genuine phenomena occurring in the Rectory. As a church-goer he placed much trust in the integrity of the cloth; too much, it seems, in the reports penned by the Rev. Foyster.

It would extend this review to an inordinate length if I were to deal with other questionable statements in the first chapters of this book. Nevertheless, mention must be made of the references to the Glanville planchette scripts. These scripts are rightly very suspect, both as to the leading questions asked and the nature of the replying 'entities' (Owen and Mitchell referred to the celebrated 'Philip' case to put us on our guard against taking 'spirits' at their face value. As may be recalled, the self-styled communicator Philip was manufactured by a group expressly sitting for that very purpose.) What Mr Wood doesn't mention is Harry Price's declared reservations on the Glanville experiments in *The End of Borley Rectory*. He wrote on p.145: "One last warning. Do not take these scripts—or rather the information—too seriously. There are 'lying spirits', I presume, just as there are lying humans. But some of the information is interesting, even remarkable."

From Chapter 5 onwards to the end of Wood's book we are on somewhat more solid ground, although riddled with 'perhaps' and 'probable'. Marianne's life is copiously detailed, a life marked by a notorious series of extra-marital affairs, deceit, imposture and fantasy. It is a fascinating narrative, albeit frequently marred by weak supposition and innuendo. There is a heavy reliance on the testimony of her son Ian (by her first and teenage marriage to Harold

Greenwood) but with only a brief concession that it is, in part, uncorroborated. A good case is made out for the compliance of the Rev. Foyster in her deceptions, but no evidence is proffered for some of the author's allegations against him. He is called a pervert along with the suggestion that he was a voyeur, yet with nothing to substantiate that he watched her sexual acts with others, which is vastly different from knowing about them. Equally extravagant is another dark hint that he was inclined to paedophilia.

Marianne's remarks about her husband are accepted by the author when it suits his purpose. Thus, the apparently paranormal movements of objects in the Rectory as recorded by Foyster are attributed by her to his habitual and chronic forgetfulness as to where he placed things. Robert Wood will not allow that there is any need for thinking that any paranormal events occurred in the house during the Foysters' residence. All is attributed to childish tricks played on Lionel Foyster by Marianne and others. It is asserted that her role in this was to make herself the centre of attention, the Rectory being depicted as a hothouse of intrigue. Moreover, Foyster is assumed to have been well aware that the haunting was fraudulent, himself joining in the games, in order to use the incidents for his book, *Fifteen Months in a Haunted House*. I find the presentation of this thesis grotesquely thin and unconvincing, but on this other readers must judge.

The 'writing on the wall', given a short chapter to itself, is far too complex a subject for detailed observations in this review except to note that Marianne certainly had a hand in it, literally. The reproduction on p.99 of a 'message' along with her signature shown beneath for comparison strongly supports this, while to Owen and Mitchell she admitted that she and others wrote beneath the 'messages' yet denying she initiated them. The involvement of Edwin Whitehouse (later Dom Richard OSB) in the Borley saga requires a far more careful treatment than is given.

Although Robert Wood's book can in no way be called impartial or scholarly, it deserves to be read and placed on the shelf with other Borley memorabilia. It should be read on two counts: first, for the absorbing data on the Foysters and others in the *dramatis personae*, and secondly, not least as a classic display of tendentious reportage.

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