

The Philip Experiment **By Scott Fowler**

Shortly after Maggie, Katie and Leah Fox announced that they were communicating with spirits in their home, the “religion” of Spiritualism shot up in popularity. The church service of this new religion was the séance. In most cases, a medium and a group of about five to ten people would sit around a table, in a dark room, holding hands as the medium channeled any ghosts that may be present.

Through out the heyday of Spiritualism, many paranormal phenomenon was reported during these rituals. Knocks and taps on the tables and walls from supposed spirits, table tipping, discarnate voices and apparitions were all experienced. Many of these activities have been ruled faked by dishonest mediums of the time looking for notoriety. However, some of the phenomenon has not been appropriately explained.

Most of these phenomena where similar to activities reported in poltergeist cases. During the 1960s and 1970s, a theory began to take form that stated that most, if not all, poltergeist cases were a result of a person’s subconscious mind sending signals into the environment. These signals would then manipulate objects and move them. Upon further investigation, it was shown that most poltergeist cases tended to center around a child or teenager. It was theorized then that the hormonal changes during puberty and the emotional turmoil that caused created a situation in the mind that was conducive to creating poltergeist activity.

So, the question arose, was the phenomenon reported during seances characteristic of Spiritualism during the 19th century actual ghosts trying to communicate or created by the subconscious of the group?

In 1972, the Toronto Society of Psychical Research decided that an experiment was in order to try finding out. Their goal was to create a ghost from scratch and only from their imagination.

Their first step was to create their personality. They would take great pains to make this fictional, nonexistent person seem real. As team leader Dr. A. R. G. Owen stated in his book *Conjuring Up Philip*, “It was essential to their purpose that Philip be a totally fictitious character. Not merely a figment of the imagination but clearly and obviously so, with a biography full of historical errors.”(Bradbury 182) Their ghost would never have existed.

As it became, Philip Aylesford was “living” during the 1600s at the time of Oliver Cromwell. The Toronto group had Philip a Catholic loyal to the king. He was married to very cold woman named Dorothea who would not mother him children. The two lived at his family home of Diddington Manor. Though there was really a Diddington Manor in England, no such person as Philip Aylesford ever lived there.

A particular incident the group created for Philip figures into his character as a ghost. One day while he rode his horse near the boundaries of the estate, he happened upon a gypsy encampment. There he met Margo, a beautiful, dark haired girl with whom he fell straight in love. He moved Margo to the gatehouse and kept their love a secret from his wife. Eventually, however, Dorothea found out and accused Margo of witchcraft. Fearing he’d lose both his reputation and possessions, Philip said nothing and

let Margo be burned at the stake. Philip's subsequent remorse sent him into deep depression. He took to pacing the battlements of Diddington Manor at night. One morning, Philip's body was discovered at the base of the battlements an apparent suicide. He was 30 years old.

With Philip and his history now established even down to a drawing made by one of the group members, they began going about memorizing this non-existent character, creating more details, and learning about the historical period in which he "lived". "They sought to create a 'collective hallucination' of Philip by describing his appearance, food preferences, and "especially his feelings toward Dorothea and Margo, until they had created a complete mental picture of him which they could all subscribe." (Bradbury, 182)

In September 1972, once the eight-member group felt ready, they began to conduct regular seances. They would gather a candle lit room with a picture of Philip in the center of the table and concentrate on conjuring Philip. Month after month went by and no Philip. After much time had passed, they decided to take a new strategy. They initiated a more relaxed attitude, as Spiritualists had done a hundred years before them. It was when they began this new tactic that experimenters began to get results.

At first, they felt only vibrations in the tabletop that they couldn't explain. Soon, however, the vibrations developed into knocking sounds. Thinking they themselves were inadvertently causing the raps, they investigated. "But when the table started to move around the floor in an irregular, apparently aimless manner, they started questioning one another. Finally, a member asked, 'I wonder whether Philip is doing this?'" (Bradbury 183) At which point a loud knock came on the table. Before long, they had a system worked out where "yes" was one knock and "no" was two knocks.

With this dichotomy in place, they began to conduct a series of conversations with Philip. They joked with him, teased him, even flirted with him. They learned his likes and dislikes and found he had strong views on subjects. When Philip was asked if Dorothea, his wife, didn't want children, the members heard scratching sounds coming from the walls. One member asked if the question was too personal and one loud rap was heard responding with a yes.

It was noticed by all present that "the raps and movements of the table seemed to be very closely related, if not actually activated, by the knowledge, thoughts, will, moods and power of concentration of each member of the group." (Bradbury 183) Dr. Owen stated that if the entire team were in agreement to the answer to a question, the responses would come very quickly but if one or more people were uncertain in the answer then Philip's responses would be hesitant, taking some time to reply.

As the group became more comfortable with their encounters with Philip, they began to treat him as just another member of the group. They learned his personality as if he was a good friend. And Philip would play tricks on them. At times, he would move the table around the room, especially to rush up to those arriving late as if to greet them and say "Hi". Other times, the table would trap certain individuals in corners.

During one especially active night, one of the members jokingly admonished Philip by telling him that he could be sent away and replaced. After that, Philip's activity began to decrease until it stopped altogether and the experiment was stopped.

It was decided that the experiment was a huge success. Far more than they ever expected. As member Iris M. Owen state, "We clearly understand and have proved that

there is no 'spirit' behind the communications; the messages are from the group subconscious, but it is they physical force we need to know more about." (Bradbury 183)

The Toronto Society's success encouraged other groups to attempt similar experiments. "Another Toronto group created 'Lilith', a French-Canadian spy during World War II, and a group of French students from Quebec created 'Sebastian', a medieval alchemist, and 'Axel', a man from the future." (Guiley 286) At one point the Toronto Society's group conducted a séance with the French students. The resulting incorporeal conversation was said to be rather amusing.

Before too long, it was determined the experiments took too great a time to set up. Yes, they had proven a connection between the mind and psychokinetic activities during seances, essentially proving the theories of British psychologist Kenneth J. Batchelder. "It was Batchelder's theory that the atmosphere of belief and expectation that permeates a séance in effect creates the phenomena that Spiritualists attribute to spirits." (Guiley 286) But the time needed to produce the desired effect was prohibitive.

At the beginning of the experiment, the stated goal was to eventually create an apparition. Though toward the end of 1977 they felt they were close to reaching that goal, interest in the experiment waned and activities were discontinued.

Works Cited

1. *Into The Unknown*, Bradbury, Will (Ed.), Readers Digest Association, Pleasantville, NY, 1981.
2. *The Encyclopedia of Ghosts and Spirits*, Guiley, Rosemary Ellen, Checkmark Books, New York, NY, 2000.