

Walter Leaf

Walter Leaf (1852-1927) was a prominent English banker, classical scholar and psychical researcher, who contributed to the study of the spirit medium Leonora Piper.

Life and Career

Walter Leaf attended Harrow School in 1866 and then Trinity College, Cambridge where he became an honorary fellow in 1875. He was fluent in several languages, a leading scholar of classical studies, and president of the Hellenic Society and the Classical Association. Together with [Andrew Lang](#) and Ernest Myers (brother of [FWH Myers](#)), he made a much-praised English translation of Homer's *Iliad*.

In 1891, he was appointed a director of the Westminster Bank and became its chairman in 1918. He was the president of the Institute of Bankers and the International Chamber of Commerce.

Psychical Research

Leaf joined the [Society for Psychical Research](#) in 1884 and served on the council from 1889 to 1902. He played an active part with [Oliver Lodge](#) and FWH Myers in studying the Boston medium [Leonora Piper](#) on her first visit to England in 1889-90, organizing sittings in Cambridge and London and contributing commentary to the subsequent report.

Views

Leaf rejected the view, favoured by Myers, Lodge and some others, that Piper was communicating with deceased 'spirits', concluding that her control personality 'Phinuit' was a secondary personality. However, he stated that he was convinced of a supernormal process, since 'Phinuit' possessed a 'quite exceptional power of reading the contents of the minds of sitters'.¹

Regarding the question of post-mortem survival, Leaf took the view that the evidence presented by Myers in his *Human Personality and its Survival of Bodily Death* (1903) tended to weaken the concept of personality as an integrated whole, and he therefore doubted that it survived death in its familiar existing form. However, he also considered that 'something of us' does seem to survive death, at least temporarily, namely, 'a more or less coherent complex of memories' to which mediums may gain access.² But he thought of this in a positive sense, writing:

It is a hope and not a fear that the dissolution of the body may mean the dissolution of this spiritual crust as well; that one day the infinite which is within us all may have freer play, and mingle in unconstrained communion with other spiritual elements equally purged of earthly dross, through channels infinitely clearer and more translucent than the imperfect and unsatisfying organs of the mortal frame.³

Works (Selected)

Book Translation

A Modern Priestess of Isis by Vsevolod Sergeyevich Solovyov (1895). Abridged and translated from the Russian on behalf of the Society for Psychical Research

Articles

Professor Liégeois on suggestion and somnambulism in relation to jurisprudence (1889). *Proceedings of the Society for Psychical Research* 15, 222-24.

Two books [treatises] on hypnotism [by A. von Forel and E. von Baierlacher (1889). *Proceedings of the Society for Psychical Research* 15, 225-27.

A record of observations of certain phenomena of trance. Part II (1890). *Proceedings of the Society for Psychical Research* 17, 558-646.

Mr Petrovo-Solovovo on Spiritism (1907). *Proceedings of the Society for Psychical Research* 19, 397-409.

Vis-Knut (1908). *Proceedings of the Society for Psychical Research* 21, 136-48.

Book Reviews

Cock Lane and Common Sense, by A. Lang (1894). *Proceedings of the Society for Psychical Research* 10, 423-26.

Revista Di Studi Psichichi: Periodico Mensile, ed. by G.B. Ermacora (1895). *Proceedings of the Society for Psychical Research* 11, 171-72.

L'hypothese du Magnetisme Animal, by E. Boirac (1895). *Proceedings of the Society for Psychical Research* 11, 599-600.

The Precursors of Spiritism for the Last 250 Years, by A.M. Aksakoff (1897). *Proceedings of the Society for Psychical Research* 12, 319-30.

The Scientific Investigation of Physical Phenomena with Mediums, by M.M. Petrovo-Solovovo (1901). *Proceedings of the Society for Psychical Research* 15, 416-22.

Human Personality and its Survival of Bodily Death, by F.W.H. Myers (1903). *Proceedings of the Society for Psychical Research* 18, 53-61.

Hypnotism: Its History, Practice and Theory, by J.M. Bramwell (1904). *Proceedings of the Society for Psychical Research* 18, 481-90.

Fragments of Prose and Poetry, by F.W.H. Myers (1905). *Proceedings of the Society for Psychical Research* 51, 342-45.

Melvyn Willin

Literature

Anon. (1927). Obituary: Dr Walter Leaf. *Journal of the Society for Psychical Research* 24, 52-53.

Leaf, W. Review of *Human Personality and its Survival of Bodily Death*, by F.W.H. Myers (1903). *Proceedings of the Society for Psychical Research* 18, 53-61.

Myers, F.W.H., Lodge, O., & Leaf, W. (1890). A record of observations of certain phenomena of trance. *Proceedings of the Society for Psychical Research* 17, 436-660.

Endnotes

Footnotes

- [1.](#) Myers, Lodge, & Leaf (1890), 507.
- [2.](#) Leaf (1903), 56.
- [3.](#) Leaf (1903), 61.