

Helen Salter

Helen Salter (née Verrall) (1883-1959) was a British psychologist and psychical researcher, who played a leading role in the production and analysis of the body of survival evidence known as the Cross-Correspondences.

Early Life

Helen Woollgar de Gaudrion Verrall was born in Cambridge on 4 July 1883 to two distinguished Cambridge scholars, Arthur Woollgar Verrall, tutor and lecturer in classics at Trinity College, Cambridge, and Margaret de Gaudrion Verrall (née Merrifield) lecturer in classics at Newnham College, Cambridge. She had one sibling, a sister, who died in infancy.¹

Helen was educated at home by her mother before attending Newnham College to study classics, earning first class honours in the Classics Tripos. She afterwards read psychology for a year at the University of London and in 1913 was appointed Demonstrator of Psychology at King's College, London. She was elected a member of the [British Psychological Society](#) in 1914.

Among her friends she counted Aelfrida Tillyard, poet, mystic and briefly a disciple of the occultist Aleister Crowley. She was also a friend of the poet Rupert Brooke, whom she met at Cambridge before the First World War and helped with the production of comic plays.²

In 1915, she married [William Henry Salter](#), a former pupil of her father who was also to become a prominent member of the SPR, serving as president in 1947-48. The marriage ceremony was conducted by Rev MA Bayfield, a family friend and active member of the Society. The couple had two children, Imogen (b 1926) and Martin (b 1929).

She held public offices in local government, including chair of the Saffron Walden Rural District Council from 1937 to 1947. She later became an Income Tax Commissioner, a post she held until her death in 1959.

Psychical Research

Helen Salter's mother Margaret Verrall was intensely interested in psychical research, joining the SPR in 1889 and being elected to its governing council in 1901. The family home at 5 Selwyn Gardens, Cambridge was the scene of séances with mediums, and experiments such as crystal gazing and table turning.³ As a five-year old, Helen took part in telepathy experiments with her mother.⁴ She played games with [Frederic Myers](#), a founder member of the SPR, and also knew the SPR's first president [Henry Sidgwick](#), his wife [Eleanor](#), and [Richard Hodgson](#), one of the Society's most active investigators of mediums.

Margaret Verrall's experiments included automatic writing, in which the hand writes material that appears not to originate in the conscious mind. Following the

death of Myers in 1901, statements that appeared to originate from his surviving mind began to feature in her scripts. In the following years, interlinking references relating to Myers and other deceased colleagues multiplied in her trance writings and those of other mediums and automatists, generating the body of survival evidence referred to as the [Cross-Correspondences](#). Encouraged by her mother, Helen produced her first script in 1903, aged twenty (see more below).

Society for Psychical Research

Salter joined the SPR in 1905 and in 1910 was appointed assistant to [Alice Johnson](#), the research officer. She was then research officer from 1916 to 1921, and editor of the *SPR Journal* and *Proceedings* from 1916 to 1929 and 1946 respectively. She joined the SPR Council in 1921, a position she held for thirty-nine years.

In 1915 she started teaching psychical research to third-year psychology students at King's College, London. This was the first course of its kind, but her pioneering role has largely gone unacknowledged.

Salter's Researches

Angel of Mons

In 1915, Salter undertook an investigation of reports emanating from the battlefields of northern France, of visions of supernatural entities intervening to support the Allies. This was the SPR's most significant wartime investigation, published in its *Journal* as 'An Enquiry Concerning "The Angel at Mons"'. Under the presidency of FCS Schiller, the Society had set a sceptical tone towards wartime phenomena and this enquiry was no exception, concluding, against contemporary popular opinion, that fatigue was the likely explanation. But Salter's research broke new ground in establishing the problems of interpreting eyewitness testimony.

Gladys Leonard

Towards the end of World War I, Salter conducted research on the medium [Gladys Leonard](#), initially in participation with the novelist Marguerite Radclyffe-Hall and Radclyffe-Hall's partner Una Vincenzo (Lady Troubridge). The committee held a total of 73 sittings, some of which featured communicators who identified themselves as Margaret and Arthur Verrall, Salter's deceased parents. The experiments included 'book tests' in which the medium accurately identified passages in volumes in distant locations that she could have no way of knowing.⁵

Eva C

In 1920, Salter joined a SPR committee charged with examining [Marthe Béraud](#), a young French girl whose apparent ability to produce materialized forms in séances had been investigated by French researchers Charles Richet and Gustave Geley and, in considerable depth, by Albert von Schrenck-Notzing in Munich.⁶ Forty sittings were held with Marthe (now referred to pseudonymously as 'Eva Carriere' or 'Eva C') under relatively strict control conditions at the SPR offices in Hanover Square. The phenomena fell far short of that reported earlier: the researchers observed

various substances, disc-like shapes, pointed objects, hands and faces (the latter appearing roughly drawn and flat), like photographs, but were unable to reach a firm conclusion about them.

Telepathy Experiments

Salter returned frequently to the study of telepathy. An early contribution to the *Journal* was a 1915 paper on thirty-four experiments with two sisters, Louisa and Kathleen Tipping, at the SPR offices in London. Of these nine were successful, a result she considered inconclusive.

Trials with volunteers the same year yielded one successful subject, who, aided by hypnosis, received 'vivid mental pictures' in experiments with Salter acting as 'sender'.⁷

Together with her husband, Salter had success in informal experiments with [Gilbert Murray](#), a former SPR president with an apparent gift for telepathic perception.⁸

In a large-scale experiment, a radio appeal for listeners' experiences resulted in a postbag of 400 letters, of which 58 were found to be potentially evidential. This research was published in book form as *Evidence for Telepathy* in 1934 and as a chapter in the 1936 volume *Essays in Honour of Gilbert Murray*. Here Salter stressed the general unreliability of memory, especially when emotionally charged, and the consequent need for full contemporaneous documentation and witness corroboration.

Other of Salter's conclusions about telepathy – for instance that it cannot be trained, and that laboratory experiments should use 'gifted' subjects (those deemed to have a special faculty for it) – were largely confirmed by later researchers. She doubted whether an emotional bond between two individuals is required for telepathic interaction, pointing to spontaneous cases involving strangers, although bonded pairs such as twins and couples have been found by contemporary experimentalists to be especially promising subjects. She also observed that communication with the dead, if it occurs, should be classed as telepathy.⁹

Cross-Correspondences

Salter grew up in the world of the cross-correspondences, her mother Margaret Verrall not only producing seemingly evidential scripts as an automatist, but also analysing them as a researcher. In 1906 it was noticed that scripts produced by different automatists appeared to be connected – without their knowledge and in the absence of any communication between them – from which it was inferred that they might be being directed by discarnate personalities, to provide evidence of having survived death. Encouraged by her mother, Salter began to experiment with trance writing, producing automatic scripts in quantity from 1907 and continuing until 1932.¹⁰

As an example: in 1907, scripts produced by Verrall at her home in Cambridge were found to contain a drawing of three arrows. The following day [Leonora Piper](#), a Boston medium, received a message, purportedly from the deceased Richard

Hodgson, to the effect that he had given an 'arrow' to Margaret Verrall. Five days later, Salter, in a different location and unaware of these messages, similarly produced an arrow during an automatic writing session.[11](#)

Salter also worked on the interpretation of messages. One of her earliest publications in the *Journal* (1911) considered to what extent the appearance of them being linked might be put down to chance. Her later work included an analysis (1914) of trance writing material produced by five siblings of the Mckinnon family,[12](#) and in 1938 a possible communication from her father ('A Sermon in St Paul's').[13](#)

Selected Works

Books

Evidence for Telepathy: The Response to a Broadcast Request for Cases (1934). London: Sidgwick & Jackson.

Psychical Research: Where Do We Stand? The Eighth Frederic W.H. Myers Memorial Lecture (1945). Glasgow: Robert MacLehose & Co. Ltd., University Press.

Chapters in Books

Telepathy (1934). In *Inquiry into the Unknown*, ed. by T. Besterman. London: Methuen & Co.

The evidence for telepathy (1936). In *Essays in Honour of Gilbert Murray*, ed. by J.A.K. Thomson & A. Toynbee. London: Allen and Unwin.

Articles

[The element of chance in cross-correspondences](#) (1911). *Journal of the Society for Psychical Research* 15, 153-72.

[A further study of the Mac scripts](#) (1915). *Proceedings of the Society for Psychical Research* 27, 250-78.

History of Martha Béraud, "Eva C." (1915). *Proceedings of the Society for Psychical Research* 27, 339-69.

Some recent experiments in thought transference (1915). *Proceedings of the Society for Psychical Research* 27, 415-57.

Comments on an Icelandic seer (1915). *Journal of the Society for Psychical Research* 17, 78-82.

An enquiry concerning "The Angels at Mons" (1915). *Journal of the Society for Psychical Research* 17, 106-18.

Some experiments with a new automatist (1918). *Proceedings of the Society for Psychical Research* 29, 306-49.

A further report on sittings with Mrs. Leonard (1922). *Proceedings of the Society for Psychical Research* 32, 1-143.

Some incidents occurring at sittings with Mrs. Leonard, which may throw light on their 'modus operandi' (1930). *Proceedings of the Society for Psychical Research* 39, 306-32.

The history of George Valiantine (1932). *Proceedings of the Society for Psychical Research* 40, 389-410.

[A sermon in St. Paul's](#). (1938). *Proceedings of the Society for Psychical Research* 45, 25-42.

Experiments in telepathy with Dr Gilbert Murray (1941). *Journal of the Society for Psychical Research* 32, 29-38.

Leo Ruickbie

Literature

(Note: Writings by H. Salter are found also under H. Verrall)

Broad, C.D. (1959). Obituary Helen Salter. *Journal of the Society for Psychical Research* 40, 129-36.

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Johnson, A. (1907a). A series of automatic writings. *Journal of the Society for Psychical Research* 13, 98-102.

Johnson, A. (1907b). On the automatic writing of Mrs Holland. *Proceedings of the Society for Psychical Research* 21, 166-391.

Mann, S. (2013). *Aelfrida Tillyard: Hints of a Perfect Splendour*. Cambridge, UK: Wayment.

Piddington, J.G. (1908). A series of concordant automatisms. *Proceedings of the Society for Psychical Research* 22, 19-416.

Pleasants, H. (1964). *Biographical Dictionary of Parapsychology with Directory and Glossary 1946-1996*. New York: Garrett Publications.

Ruickbie, L. (2018). *Angels in the Trenches: Spiritualism, Superstition and the Supernatural During the First World War*. London: Robinson.

Salter, H. (1915). An enquiry concerning "The Angels at Mons". *Journal of the Society for Psychical Research* 17, 106-18.

Salter, H. (1915). [A further study of the Mac scripts](#). *Proceedings of the Society for Psychical Research* 27, 250-78.

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- Salter, H. (1922). A further report on sittings with Mrs Leonard. *Proceedings of the Society for Psychical Research* 32, 1-143.
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- Sidgwick, E.M. (1916). Obituary Notice: Mrs A.W. Verrall. *Proceedings of the Society for Psychical Research* 29, 170-76.
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- Troubridge, U. (1922). The 'modus operandi' in so-called mediumistic trance. *Proceedings of the Society for Psychical Research* 32, 344-78.
- Verrall, M. (1906). On a series of automatic writings. *Proceedings of the Society for Psychical Research* 20, 1-432.
- Verrall, H. (1907). On the automatic writing of Mrs Holland. *Proceedings of the Society for Psychical Research* 21, 166-391.
- Verrall, H. (1915). History of Martha Béraud, "Eva C.". *Proceedings of the Society for Psychical Research* 27, 333-69.

Endnotes

Footnotes

- [1](#). The principal source for Salter's life and work is an obituary by C.D. Broad (1959), which includes an additional reminiscence from G.W. Lambert. A short entry was also published in Pleasants (1964). More information can be

found in the Archives of the SPR at Cambridge University Library, some of which is referenced in Ruickbie (2018).

- [2.](#) Mann & Tillyard (2013); Stringer (1972), 52, 78.
- [3.](#) General Meeting, *Journal of the Society for Psychical Research* 10, 1901, 2-5.
- [4.](#) Sidgwick (1916), 170-76.
- [5.](#) Salter (1922); Troubridge (1922).
- [6.](#) Dingwall (1922), 209-343.
- [7.](#) Salter (1918).
- [8.](#) Salter (1941).
- [9.](#) See Salter (1934).
- [10.](#) For the early development of the cross-correspondences, see Verrall (1906); Johnson (1907a) and (1907b); and Piddington (1908).
- [11.](#) For the full account, see Piddington, 77-86.
- [12.](#) Salter (1915).
- [13.](#) Salter (1938).