



The Skeptics SA guide to Seances

A seance is a meeting or a sitting of persons seeking spiritualistic manifestations.

Although accounts of seances probably pre-date the written word, one of the best known, some three thousand years old, can be found in the First Book of Samuel, 28: 7–25:

“Then Saul said unto his servants, Seek me a woman that hath a familiar spirit, that I may go to her, and enquire of her. And his servants said unto him, Behold, there is a woman that hath a familiar spirit at Endor.”

The story continues with the clairvoyant communicating with the spirit of Samuel, the former King, who had few words of comfort for the troubled Saul, telling him that he would die in battle the next day. Unfortunately for the inquirer, the prediction of the Woman of Endor came to pass and Saul met his tragic fate as foretold.

Recorded on an ancient Egyptian papyrus in the Leyden museum in Germany is another account, this time of a man complaining that he was being harassed by the spirit of his dead wife.

In the first century CE Porphyry, a Neo-Platonist philosopher, describes several seances at which physical manifestations were produced by mediums.

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There are few surviving accounts of seances and related psychic phenomena that have come down from the Middle Ages, principally due to the persecution by the Christian Church of any deemed to be associated with witchcraft. Some that did however, although not strictly mediumistic, were the prognostications of Nostradamus: even then he took considerable precautions to disguise his auguring.

The hey-day of the spiritualist and the seance was undoubtedly between the mid-nineteenth century and the 1930s, in particular, at the time of World War I when the relatives of the hundreds of thousands of young men slaughtered on the battlefields of France sought consolation in their bereavement through the medium of spiritualists and seances.

Raymond Lodge, the youngest son of Sir Oliver Lodge, was killed in action in Flanders on September 14 1915. On August 8 1915, five weeks before the death of the Lodge's son, Mrs Piper, a famous medium, allegedly received a message during a seance from Richard Hodgson, a friend of Lodge's who had died in 1905. The message indicated the tragic blow about to befall them. Subsequently on September 19 a communication came through to say that Raymond was happy and that he was going to

learn to help others who were coming over in large numbers because of the war.

Later, a further communication prompted Lodge to write a book *Raymond, or Life and Death*, which brought comfort to thousands who had lost their loved ones during the war.

Many people believe in the soul's survival after the body dies for various reasons. A seance is the medium through which communication is allegedly conducted. Evidence for any success in this endeavor however, is extremely tenuous, and where investigations have been carried out over the past 100 years by such august institutions as the British and American Societies for Psychological Research, and in more recent times by skeptical and scientific groups: where fraud has not predominated in their findings, more rational and acceptable explanations have been given for the supernatural claims made.

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