

The Thompson-Gifford Case

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During January 1907, Frederic L. Thompson, a New York City goldsmith, consulted Dr. James H. Hyslop, the founder and director of the American Institute for Scientific Research, which was devoted to the study of abnormal psychology and psychical research. "Mr. Thompson came to me with the fear that his visions and hallucinations were threatening his sanity," Hyslop recorded.



James H. Hyslop

Thompson informed Hyslop, a former Columbia University professor of logic and ethics, that around the middle of 1905 he was "suddenly and inexplicably seized with an impulse to sketch and paint pictures." Prior to that, he had no real interest or experience in art beyond the engraving required in his occupation. The impulses were accompanied by "hallucinations or visions" of trees and landscapes. He explained that he sometimes felt like a man named Robert Swain Gifford. At times he would remark to his wife that "Gifford wants to sketch."

Thompson had met Gifford some years earlier in the marshes of New Bedford, Massachu-

setts, as he was hunting and Gifford was sketching. Thompson recalled talking to Gifford for a few minutes on one occasion and just seeing him on a couple of other occasions. Also, he once called on Gifford to show him some jewelry, but that was the extent of their contact.

During the latter part of January, 1906, Thompson saw a notice of an exhibition of Gifford's paintings at an art gallery and went to see them. While looking at one of the paintings on exhibition, Thompson heard a voice in his ear saying, "You see what I have done. Can you not take up and finish my work?" It was then that he learned that Gifford had died on January 15, 1905, some six months before he developed the interest in painting. "Whether genuine or not it had sufficient influence on the mind of Mr. Thompson to induce him to go on with his sketching and painting," Hyslop said of the voice. "From this time on the impulse to paint was stronger, and between this date and the next year he produced a number of paintings of artistic merit sufficient to demand a fair price on their artistic qualities alone, his story being concealed from all but his wife."

When Thompson showed one of his paintings to an art connoisseur, he was told that it resembled the work of Gifford, even though Thompson made no mention of the Gifford influence.

One vision of some gnarled oak trees especially haunted him. He felt he had to find the scene and paint it. It was at this point that he contacted Hyslop. He sketched the gnarled oak trees for Hyslop, stressing that the need to find the trees and paint them was overwhelming him and causing him to lose interest in his job.

Since Hyslop had been studying mediumistic phenomena, he arranged to have Thompson sit with a medium, referred to as "Mrs. Rathbun," (a pseudonym). She was told nothing of Thompson or his problem. After the medium described someone who Thompson took to be his grandmother, she told Thompson that there was a man behind him who was said to be fond of painting. While no name could be obtained, Gifford recognized the description given as that of Gifford. Mrs. Rathbun described the locality of Gifford's birthplace and then described a group of oak trees, which Thompson recognized as those that he had been visualizing for over a year. However, the limitations of Mrs. Rathbun's mediumship prevented the communicator from giving the location of the scene, other than that one had to take a boat to get there, and that it was near the ocean.

Hyslop then arranged a sitting with "Mrs. Chenoweth," later identified as Minnie Meserve Soule. Thompson was not admitted to the room until after she had gone into a trance. Some 20 bits of information were mentioned to suggest that Gifford was communicating, including a reference to his fondness for rugs and rich and flesh colors, to a tarpaulin which he frequently wore, to his sudden death, his unfinished work, to the condition of his studio, to misty scenes, and finally to a group of oak trees. Thompson then asked if he could be given the location of the oak trees. Much the same information as came through Mrs. Rathbun was given, although a little was added. "When you go up here on this hill, as I told you about, an ocean in front of you, it will be to your left, and you will go down a little incline, almost a gulley, and then up a little bit and jut out. ...They look like gnarled old trees. There is one that stands up quite straight, and some roots that you can see, not dead but part dead...."

But, as other psychical researchers have noted, especially with trance mediums, many spirit communicators have difficulty giving

names. This is because they transmit ideas, not words. If there is no symbol for the word, then it is difficult to get the name through the medium's brain. As a result the name of the place could not be given, nor could Gifford's name.

Thompson thought the scene might be at Nonquitt, Massachusetts, where Gifford had a summer home which was accessible only by boat. He went there and found several of the scenes he had seen in his visions but not the gnarled oak trees. Inquiring then of Mrs. Gifford, he was told that Gifford's favorite place was one of the Elizabeth Islands. While Thompson was visiting Mrs. Gifford, he was shown around Gifford's old studio and was shocked to see three paintings there which were almost mirror images of those he had sketched during his "hallucinations," one of a man with an ox team.



Thompson's Vision of a Painting by Gifford



Actual Painting of a Scene by Gifford

Thompson then went to the Elizabeth Islands and found the gnarled oak trees on the island of Nashawena, a place he had never been.

He immediately painted the scene. He also found several other scenes he had sketched or painted. While viewing one of them, he heard a voice similar to the one he had heard at the art gallery say, "Go and look on the other side of the tree." There he found Gifford's initials carved in the bark of a beach tree in 1902. Some two months later, Hyslop visited the scenes with Thompson and observed scenes and the initials, concluding that the initials were old and weathered and thus could not have been recently carved by Thompson as some kind of trick.

On April 3, 1908, Hyslop arranged another sitting with Mrs. Rathbun. Much relevant information came through, including references to his art work, but what Hyslop found most interesting was a communication from an alleged spirit giving the Latin words "*alter ego*," as the influence affecting him. That's because when he took Thompson for another visit with Mrs. Chenoweth, the same words were communicated there.

At the sitting with Mrs. Chenoweth, Gifford communicated with much evidential information, including "scraggly and gnarled oaks." The communicator (Gifford) then asked Thompson if he remembered standing on a bridge and looking down at the water when a great desire came over him to paint. Thompson remembered it well. "I was there and followed him for some time," the spirit message continued. "Sometimes in the old days he was so disheartened and blue, as if had not found the right path, but now he is far happier and life seems more complete."

Still, Gifford's name was never mentioned. Hyslop then arranged for Thompson to sit with "Mrs. Smead," another medium he had been studying. Here again, there were many references to Thompson's art work, and in this case the communicator was able to get through his initials, R.S.G. for Robert Swain Gifford.

"On any theory we ought to recognize that the identity of Mr. Gifford is clear," Hyslop concluded. "There are perhaps no single incidents

that would force one to accept this view, but their collective force is overwhelming and constitutes a mass of relevant hints inapplicable to any one else."

While skeptics might claim that Thompson made up the whole story and that he actually visited the scenes beforehand and made the sketches he claimed came from his visions, Hyslop saw no motive for such a charade, nor could fraud explain how Thompson suddenly became an accomplished artist with no prior experience or training. Most of all, though, Thompson had no control over the sittings with the mediums, which were arranged and observed by Hyslop. If Thompson had been faking it, how did all the veridical information concerning Gifford come through the mediums?

"Superficially, at least, all the facts point to the spiritistic hypothesis, whatever perplexities exist in regard to the *modus operandi* of the agencies effecting the result," Hyslop ended the report.

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