

A Christmas Carol Debunked

The Musings of a Paranormal Investigator, Dickens Fan & Christmas Devotee

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Having a keen interest in paranormal phenomenon coupled with being a history buff, I have taken an interest in exploring old cases of paranormal claims. The dawn of the spiritualist movement, which was the genesis that has evolved into modern day paranormal research, was in the latter part of the 1800's. Upon a recent trip to London I travelled to Oxford University to research 19th century paranormal claims, I came across an interesting case that was investigated by Oxford University Professor Albus Smithson and his research assistant Thomas Dolby. On December 28, 1887 he was contacted by a London businessman by the name of Ebenezer Scrooge. Mr. Scrooge had been struggling for several days with an experience he had the night of December 24. In the case report, Mr. Scrooge had claimed to have been visited by four apparitions at different intervals throughout the night. The report went on to name one of the apparitions as his business partner, Jacob Marley, who had passed away 7 years earlier. The other three apparitions were described by Mr. Scrooge as being "spirit guides" that discussed different manifestations of his life experiences as they related to Christmas. It went on to say that each of these manifestations portrayed a different time frame for Mr. Scrooge's life, the past, present and future.

Professor Smithson and his associate did an extensive background check and conducted interviews with family and neighbors. There was a recurring theme that seemed to stand out from all of these interviews. For whatever reason, Mr. Scrooge's personality had completely changed after this experience. One particularly disturbing revelation was obtained in an interview with Mr. Scrooge's nephew, who wished to only be mentioned as Fred. He revealed that Mr. Scrooge's mother had died when he was very young and his father all but abandoned him by sending him away to boarding schools and refusing to allow him to return home for visits. He surmised this was the beginning of Mr. Scrooge's downturn that turned him into the cruel, miserly person that everyone had come to know over the years.

Upon hearing this potential catalyst towards Mr. Scrooge's mental instability, Professor Smithson consulted with Europe's most renowned neurologist, Jean Martin Charcot. Doctor Charcot was a French physician that had previously hosted a fellowship in Paris for the visiting Sigmund Freud. This fellowship had greatly influenced him to turning toward the practice of medical psychopathology. Charcot summarized that indeed these traumatic experiences followed by years of repression and anger could have indeed been the catalyst for Mr. Scrooge's experience. However, he went on to say that to make such an abrupt and complete turnaround in his state of mind or personality would have required a profound physiological change. His first hypothesis was a stroke but Mr. Scrooge showed no outward symptoms of suffering from a stroke. His second hypothesis was a physiological change induced by some chemical influence such as opium, heroin or alcohol. The investigators found no evidence of any of these substances in their initial inspection of Mr. Scrooge's home or from interviews with family and neighbors.

Basically all Professor Smithson was left with was Ebenezer Scrooge was a suffering "codependent" who was miraculously cured in one night when four apparitions visited him and showed him that he

was "a discontent, social indigent who was addicted to money and suffered from interpersonal relationship difficulties" (all of which were supposedly caused by the childhood trauma of Scrooge losing his mother at a tender age, his father then turning emotionally against him, rejecting him, and then shuttling him off to boarding schools, thereby effectively abandoning him rather than unconditionally accepting him). And on top of all that, this rapid change was caused from a physiological trauma or substance abuse. Since they had no evidence of any of these and no evidence of paranormal phenomenon they had to close the case as inconclusive. It was filed away in an office at Oxford and has been sealed away and forgotten until now.

My first thought after reading the case study was "what are they missing?" Technology and medical knowledge being what it was in the 19th century, there was surely something they must have easily overlooked. EMF influence was out of the question since electrical energy was not in use at that time. There could have been some naturally occurring high EMF levels but it was just as impossible to identify that then as it is now looking back 131 years into the past. I looked at the case report a second time with a little more detail and two things stuck out at me. The first was the description of Mr. Scrooge's living quarters from their initial inspection of the residence and the second was his culinary selections for the evening of December 24. The investigators initial description of Mr. Scrooge's home was it was dark and drab with wet patches on the ceiling and the walls caused by a leaky roof which Mr. Scrooge had been too cheap to have fixed. They also reported that near these wet areas there were patches of a dark green mold. It is a well known and documented scientific fact today that exposure to certain types of molds can have extreme mental and physiological health effects on people. These symptoms include but are not limited to vivid hallucinations. The other potential explanation lies in Mr. Scrooge's diet that evening. He reported dining on "underdone" potato, gruel and rye bread. Potatoes have been known, when exposed to light; to interpret it as a sign that they're no longer completely buried in the soil. So they produce chlorophyll pigments to help

them make use of the light's energy, and they produce bitter toxins to discourage animals from eating them. The toxins, alkaloids called solanine and chaconine, are about as powerful as their better-known cousin strychnine. They apparently interfere with the structure of all our cell membranes and also with the processing of a nerve transmitter (they inhibit acetyl cholinesterase), which can cause hallucinations and possibly convulsions. This is particularly common in potatoes that have been undercooked or not properly peeled. The third and final damning bit of evidence can be potentially found in the bread. It is now well known that moldy rye bread, prior to our 20th century preparation procedures can produce a poison known as ergot. Historian Mary Kilbourne Matossian wrote about this in her book *Poisons of the Past: Molds, Epidemics, and History* (Yale University Press, 1989). The historian at the University of Maryland at College Park argues that moldy rye flour used to make bread in Salem, Massachusetts in 1692 produced a poison called ergot, which contains mind-altering compounds similar to the hallucinogenic drug LSD and this was the probable catalyst for the Salem witch trials.

We have explored three possible explanatory reasons for Mr. Scrooge's experience. The mold in the home is a piece of evidence we are certain of because it was well documented by the initial investigators. The other two are probable yet speculative. Being an objective paranormal investigator I must implore Occam's Razor to every investigation. We have no evidence other than Mr. Scrooge's testimony of paranormal phenomenon. We do however have overwhelming psychological and probable chemical evidence to conclude that Mr. Scrooge was likely influenced by a mind altering compound in one of the three mentioned forms and this brought about an intense hallucination that manifested from years of repressed grief, regret, remorse and misery. To use a quote from Mr. Scrooge's recollection of his conversation with the apparition of Jacob Marley- "there was probably more of gravy than of grave" of this experience.

Have we completely debunked the experience of Mr. Scrooge? Not quite. There is an intangible here that appears to be beyond the realm of science. I must conclude there was indeed a spirit present at Mr. Scrooge's home on the night of December 24th. I personally have witnessed this apparition on many occasions in my life along with millions of other people around the world. It is sometimes elusive and tends to be on a residual existence but I suspect there is intelligence behind it as well. It has many names and many forms and if you are observant, you might catch a glimpse of it within the next couple of weeks. Its strongest manifestation seems to be around children. I have seen evidence of its existence in the face of my children, in music, in charity, in family, in giving and its presence is strongest when there is peace and goodwill. Mr. Scrooge may have had a physiologically prosaic experience, but this experience, through its intensity, manifested a spirit that is in each and every one of us. Some of us choose to suppress it or ignore it for our own selfish motivations but it is present all the same. All it takes is a catalyst, hopefully not as extreme as Mr. Scrooge's, to manifest. The apparition I speak of is the spirit of Christmas. May all of you document solid evidence of this apparition this year and have a Merry Christmas!