

PRF Haunting Case Study: Past Echoes Aboard “The Grey Ghost?”

Bryan Williams

Psychical Research Foundation

[This article provides an extended summary and discussion of Dr. William Roll’s 1988 investigation of the haunting occurrences reported aboard the British cruise ship *Queen Mary*.¹ It is based on a post that I’d originally written for a group discussion on Yahoo Groups in 2010. This haunting case is of particular interest because, unlike many other contemporary cases, it may contain a possible psychic component.]

Typically, apparitions (or ghosts) are thought of and described in visual terms. For instance, when people describe an apparitional experience that they’ve had at an allegedly haunted site, they seem to regularly speak of “*seeing* a ghost.” But what about the other human senses? Rather than seeing one, can a person “hear” or “smell” a ghost, for instance? Arguably, the possibility of hearing a ghost might seem plausible considering that in some haunt cases, witnesses have heard sounds that are suggestive of a human presence (such as footsteps, doors closing, and objects being disturbed in other rooms). While many of these sounds are likely to have a purely physical explanation and thus are probably not parapsychological in nature, there have been a few cases in which the sounds appeared to be “echoes from the past,” and which may be more difficult to account for because of their complexity. Assuming that they are indeed reflective of a genuine phenomenon, could such sounds be considered a form of *auditory* haunting apparition? A case that seems to raise this question was investigated by Dr. William Roll in 1988, when he was asked (along with the late British psychical researcher Tony Cornell) to look into the alleged haunting phenomena experienced by the staff and crew aboard the *Queen Mary*, the old British transatlantic ocean liner that is now permanently docked in Long Beach, California, to live out the rest of its days as a hotel and museum.

Many of the phenomena reported on the upper decks of the *Queen Mary* appear to reflect its classic seafaring days as an operating cruise ship. For instance, in the ship’s first-class indoor swimming pool, some of the staff have told of hearing echoes of people laughing and the sound of glasses clinking together, seemingly reminiscent of the pool parties that had once been held on board. In some cases, the staff have described apparitions of people in the area who are wearing old-fashioned bathing suits and caps, and wet footprints have been said to materialize along the edge of the pool. In the ship’s dining hall, apparitions of people adorned in the fashions of the 1940s have reportedly been witnessed on occasion.

Further below, within the deep reaches of the ship’s lower compartments, phenomena that seem to reflect a different period in the ship’s history have been reported by the staff and crew. For instance, in a lower area of the ship known as “Shaft Alley,” some tour guides and crew have said they’ve encountered an apparition that supposedly resembles a British sailor who had been crushed to death by a closing emergency door during a drill. While making his nightly inspections, chief engineer John Smith has heard several unusual sounds coming from the lower forward compartments near the ship’s bow. He described what he heard in the following manner:

It was my job to keep an eye out for leaks in the hull ... One night when I was checking the bow compartments from the top deck, I heard water running down below. I thought that a pipe must have burst or that the hull had sprung a leak, so I hurried below to inspect the damage. As I approached the bow, the sounds of water faded and were replaced by tapping sounds and then a sensation of shuddering and vibration, which was followed by human voices shrieking and moaning and a gravelly voice that seemed to be talking in the distance.²

According to Smith, this experience occurred again on seven or eight separate occasions, and each time he checked the compartments immediately after hearing the sounds, he never found any signs of damage or a leak, nor did he ever find anybody in the area.

The sounds heard by chief engineer Smith seem strikingly reminiscent of a tragic event that occurred during World War II, when the *Queen Mary* had been put into military service as a transport ship. (In order to better camouflage it during this period, the outer hull of the *Queen Mary* was painted over in a pale grey color, and ironically, due to its pale exterior and its rapid sailing speed, the ship was known as “The Grey Ghost” at the time.) In October of 1942, the *Queen Mary* was approaching the coast of Scotland with 10,000 American soldiers on board. Sailing beside it was the much smaller British battle cruiser *Curacao* (pronounced “cure-a-sss-ow-a”), which was intended to protect the larger transport ship from aerial attacks. To avoid the torpedoes being fired at it by German submarines, the *Queen Mary* made an evasion maneuver by zigzagging along its course. Unfortunately, a series of miscalculations made by the navigators of the *Queen Mary* and the *Curacao* led to tragic consequences when the two ships suddenly collided during the maneuver. In their book *The Queen Mary: Her Inception and History*, authors Neil Potter and Jack Frost described the collision:

Before anyone on either ship could do any more, the *Queen* caught the cruiser a glancing blow 11 feet from her stern, at an acute angle, spun her around at an angle of 90° and ploughed straight through and over her, cutting her in two like a knife through cheese as she lay pinned beneath the great, strong bows...338 experienced officers and men of the Royal Navy had lost their lives – drowned, trapped ... as the *Queen Mary*'s bow carved the cruiser in two.³

Although the *Queen Mary*'s bow had been smashed about six to eight feet inward, it suffered no other damage from the collision. However, as indicated, the damage and loss of life aboard the *Curacao* was great, and the sounds heard by chief engineer Smith in the lower bow area of the *Queen Mary* seem to closely resemble the kind of sounds one might expect to have heard when that area struck the smaller cruiser. At the time that he'd first heard them, Smith was not aware of the *Queen Mary*'s tragic collision with the *Curacao*, and only after he'd read about it in a book did he note the resemblance. He stated, “You hear the thump, you hear the vibration, you hear water gurgling, you hear crying and shrieking. If I had heard about that (the collision), I'd say, well, it ties in, but I didn't know about it till years later.”⁴

At the request of the producers of *Unsolved Mysteries*, William Roll and Tony Cornell jointly conducted a ten-day investigation aboard the *Queen Mary*. Cornell brought along researcher Howard Wilkinson and the Spontaneous Psychophysical Incident Data Electronic Recorder (or SPIDER, for short), a TV-sized array of instruments and cameras designed to record movements, sounds, infrared images, and changes in temperature. Following the witness reports, Cornell and Wilkinson took the SPIDER to the first-class swimming pool area, but it failed to detect anything unusual at the time. But the investigators noticed that water splashed along the edge of pool whenever the pool pump started up, offering a possible way to account for the wet footsteps and sounds. When the SPIDER was taken to Shaft Alley, again nothing unusual was detected.

Roll brought a group of six psychics on board, with each of them individually conducting a “psi scan” of the ship in an attempt to “sense” ghosts or areas where haunt activity had been reported. While the responses of the psychics were no higher in the reported haunt areas than in control areas where no activity had been reported, at least a few of them seem to receive impressions that were in line with the witness reports. For instance, while in Shaft Alley, one

psychic reported hearing the sound of a wrench falling to the floor. However, although the psychics didn't know until they got there that they were being brought aboard the *Queen Mary*, at least two of them had previously visited the ship and may have heard the tales of it being haunted.⁵

In addition, Roll made a preliminary attempt to measure the background magnetic fields within the ship using a Deno magnetometer.⁶ But rather than finding the high magnetic fields that are somewhat common at alleged haunt locations⁷, he found that the fields were actually close to normal range, with the fields of the lower decks being slightly lower than those of the higher decks. Possible ways to account for this include:

- 1) that any high fields may fluctuate over time, so that they appear only at certain times of day (namely when haunt phenomena occur) and are short-lived;
- 2) that the magnetometer used was not sensitive to the particular type of field aboard the ship; and
- 3) that no high magnetic fields are associated with this particular site.⁸

Without further data, it's difficult at the present time to tell which alternative may be the more likely one.

Despite the mostly chance results obtained using these various approaches, there were other aspects of the investigation that seemed interesting, at least on the surface. One afternoon during an early part of the investigation, Roll was taken down into the lower compartments by a security guard who regularly worked the graveyard shift aboard the ship. (Like chief engineer Smith, this guard would sometimes hear voices coming from the ship's bow while on his rounds, when no one was in the area). Upon lifting up the safety cover over the hatch leading down into the lower compartments, Roll and the guard could hear two men talking somewhere below, even though no one was supposed to be down there. To the guard, they sounded like crew members, but neither he nor Roll could tell exactly what they were saying to each other. Roll then called down, "Hello, is somebody there?" and "What are you doing?" But no reply came, and when climbed down the ladder to check the area, Roll found no one in the three compartments below. No one could have exited from them without being seen, because the compartments were designed to be watertight (which means no other exit doors were present) and the only available exit was through that one ladder. After Roll climbed back up, nothing more was heard from below.⁹

Later in the investigation, Roll was joined aboard the ship by his wife Lydia, and in the hope of hearing the sounds, they decided to spend the night in the bow area. Some time after midnight, they both heard faint voices off in the distance. Then, some time in the early morning hours, Lydia heard a distant conversation being carried out in what sounded to her like a foreign language, perhaps being East European. Since he was asleep at the time, the conversation wasn't heard by Roll. To them, the voices seemed as though they were coming from outside the ship, or as if someone was playing a radio somewhere.¹⁰

To see if the sound heard by Roll, his wife, the guard, and chief engineer Smith might represent something objective (rather than being purely subjective; i.e., being "all in the mind"), Roll decided early on to try and record them by leaving a voice-activated tape recorder overnight in the bow area. When he retrieved it in the morning and played it back, he found that "...the tape recorder picked up a strange sequence of noises. You could hear heavy blows of metal, sounds of rushing water and voices, one of which, low pitched and gravelly, was almost intelligible."¹¹

When he played the tape back to chief engineer Smith (without telling him what it contained beforehand), the engineer became visibly emotional and acknowledged that those were the sounds he'd often heard himself while in the bow.

How might the sounds be accounted for? Roll noted that the area next to the bow – a huge compartment that holds the ship's anchor chains – was closed off to the public and it did not seem likely that anyone falsely producing the sounds (e.g., by banging on the hull or merely talking aloud) could have hidden in there. As one possibility, the loud metal impacts may be due to the natural expansion or contraction of the metal in the ship's hull in response to temperature differences between the interior of the ship and the outside air or (more likely) the sea water in which the ship sits. The sound produced by such an expansion or contraction could then be amplified by the hollow and echoing interior of the ship. In order to examine the plausibility of such an idea, long-term temperature data would have to be collected and examined for any notable changes that occur in conjunction with the approximate occurrence of the loud impacts. However, such an idea would only seem to provide an explanation for the loud impacts, and would probably not account adequately for the sounds of rushing water and voices.

Since ordinary physical explanations have not yet been ruled out, it currently remains uncertain whether or not the sounds heard in the bow of the *Queen Mary* may represent psi-related “echoes from the past.” But assuming for the moment that at least some of them do (based on the apparent correspondence between the nature of the sounds and the tragic accident that occurred during World War II), how might we account for them? One possibility suggested by Roll is to consider the concept of “place memory” proposed by H. H. Price, a philosophy professor who had been Roll's teacher at Oxford University.¹² To account for haunting phenomena, Price suggested that memories may not be limited solely to the living brain; physical space may also be capable of retaining something like “memories” for certain events that can be re-experienced later by people who are sensitive to them (namely psychics and mediums).¹³

But if physical space can hold “memories,” how would it be able to do that? Physician and psi researcher Pamela Heath hypothesized that a PK-related process may be involved in the formation of place memory, based in part on indications of a link between intense negative emotion and PK (as seen in poltergeist cases, for example).¹⁴ On the surface, such a process would seem sensible in the case of *Queen Mary*, where one might conceptualize a scenario process in which auditory “memories” of the accident become retained in the physical space of the ship's bow, via a PK effect resulting from the emotional trauma experienced by the victims of the accident. However, to be valid as a possible explanation, such a process would require supporting evidence. At least some preliminary support for Heath's hypothesis seems to come from studies of applied PK efforts by psychics, in which the PK effect either seems to “linger” around for a short time before dissipating, or seems to extend to the surrounding environment.¹⁵ Additional evidence may further support or disprove the hypothesis.

Whether purely physical or not, the sounds and other haunting phenomena reported aboard the *Queen Mary* seem, on the surface, to be a reflection of one possible way to conceptualize the issue of survival after death. Rather than representing survival of an individual personality or consciousness, haunting cases similar to the *Queen Mary* would seem to reflect the concept of survival in the form of a persistent “memory” of the past. Much still needs to be learned before we can know for sure whether or not such a form of survival is indeed possible.

References & Notes

- ¹Roll, W. G. (1991, May). Journey to the Grey Ghost. *Fate*, pp. 55 – 61; see also the brief description of the case provided on pp. 66 – 69 of Duncan, L., & Roll, W. (1995). *Psychic Connections: A Journey into the Mysterious World of Psi*. New York: Delacorte Press.
- ²Duncan & Roll (1995), pp. 66 – 67.
- ³Potter & Frost, 1971, found in Roll (1991), pp. 56 – 57.
- ⁴Roll (1991), p. 58.
- ⁵Roll, W. G. (2003). Essay review of *Investigating the Paranormal* by Tony Cornell. *Journal of Parapsychology*, 67, 187 – 203.
- ⁶Roll, W. G. (1994). Are ghosts really poltergeists? *Proceedings of Presented Papers: The Parapsychological Association 37th Annual Convention* (pp. 347 – 351). Durham, NC: Parapsychological Association, Inc.
- ⁷Roll, W. G., & Persinger, M. A. (2001). Investigations of poltergeists and haunts: A review and interpretation. In J. Houran & R. Lange (Eds.) *Hauntings and Poltergeists: Multidisciplinary Perspectives* (pp. 123 – 163). Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc.
- ⁸There is some evidence to suggest that high magnetic fields may not be a characteristic of all alleged haunt sites. For instance, two sites investigated by Michaelleen Maher and George Hansen did not reveal any high magnetic fields when they measured for them [Maher, M. C. (2000). Quantitative investigation of the General Wayne Inn. *Journal of Parapsychology*, 64, 365 – 390; Maher, M. C., & Hansen, G. P. (1997). Quantitative investigation of a legally disputed “haunted house.” *Proceedings of Presented Papers: The Parapsychological Association 40th Annual Convention* (pp. 184 – 201). Durham, NC: Parapsychological Association, Inc.] However, the magnetic findings (or lack of them) from these investigations are subject to the same alternative ways to account for them as Roll’s.
- ⁹Roll (1991), pp. 55 – 56.
- ¹⁰Roll (1991), p. 60.
- ¹¹Roll (1991), p. 58.
- ¹²Roll (1991), pp. 60 – 61.
- ¹³Price, H. H. (1939). Haunting and the “psychic ether” hypothesis: With some preliminary reflections on the present condition and possible future of psychical research. *Proceedings of the Society for Psychical Research*, 45, 324 – 343; Price, H. H. (1940). Some philosophical questions about telepathy and clairvoyance. *Philosophy*, 15, 363 – 385.
- ¹⁴Heath, P. R. (2004). The possible role of psychokinesis in place memory. *Australian Journal of Parapsychology*, 4, 63 – 80.
- ¹⁵A review of these studies can be found in Williams, B. J., & Roll, W. G. (2006). Psi, place memory, & laboratory space. *Proceedings of Presented Papers: The Parapsychological Association 49th Annual Convention* (pp. 248 – 258). Petaluma, CA: Parapsychological Association, Inc.