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[/tvbwebmaster@btinternet.com](mailto:tvbwebmaster@btinternet.com)

THE PHYSICAL MEDIUMSHIP OF D.D. HOME



Daniel Dunglas ('D. D.') Home (1833-1886), was, as Beloff summarizes, 'the most celebrated medium of all time, judging by the number and impressiveness of the séances of which we have records and by the calibre of the observers whom he attracted in the many countries he visited'.(1)

Born in poverty and illegitimate in Edinburgh on March 20, 1833, Home was adopted by his aunt when he was an infant, and taken to Connecticut when he was nine. As a child, he experienced visions and precognition, with the most significant being the occasions when he saw a friend who had died only days earlier, and then his own mother about the time of her death even though she was some distance away from the young medium. However, it was when physical phenomena began, that he was forced to leave home, due to his family believing this was demonic: he was nineteen when he experienced his first levitation. Despite the situation in which he found himself, demonstrations of his abilities were sought, and he was welcomed by many living in New York and New England. In view of his abilities, two Harvard researchers heard of him, and on carrying out tests, found that physical phenomena occurred without there being any indication of a this-worldly cause. By the early 1850s, he was levitating, and partial materializations were being produced in his séances.

By 1855, when Home came to Britain, the news of Spiritualism had already reached this country: the American mediums, Mrs Hayden and Mrs Roberts had travelled here within five years of the Hydesville phenomenon that resulted in the birth of modern Spiritualism. Home therefore found a receptive audience when he arrived here.

An attendance at one of Home's séances would often witness extraordinary phenomena. As Gauld comments: 'His sitters were quite frequently privileged to witness the most astounding events, often in good light - levitation of tables and other objects, playing of musical instruments by unseen hands, the actual materialisation of spirit hands, and so forth'. Gauld further adds: 'He never charged for his sittings, whatever gains he made from them being indirect and in the way of hospitality and gifts'.(2)

Sitters would also sometimes be aware of the room shaking (that was sometimes described as similar to being in a ship when the engine began to operate), raps,

touches, direct writing, spirit lights appearing and psychic breezes being felt. Communicators also spoke through Home when he was entranced. What was striking about Home was that unlike most other mediums, he was able to conduct his seances in a lighted environment. Indeed, as the critical Podmore had to admit, the séance room 'could honestly be described as well lighted'.(3)

One of the more amusing incidents that occurred during a séance was when the next-world visitors thought it would be interesting to dismantle a bronze figurine and throw the pieces about the room. Unfortunately, after the séance had concluded, one piece could not be found despite careful searching. Home requested that the spirits direct him to the piece and this was duly done. Enmore Jones, who recorded details of the event, asserted that, 'It confirmed me in the belief that our spirit friends are more keen-eyed than we, that they hear our words, and can control even our physical organism'.(4) Another example of the variety of phenomena that arose was the séance on 17 July 1868; a sitter reported how during the séance, held in a lighted environment and in his own home, his elderly mother was levitated with the chair on which she sat. Clearly, attending a séance with Home was not an occasion that was easily forgotten.

The report made by William Crookes, who began an investigation in 1871 concerning Home's mediumship, included details of the many instances when phenomena occurred. One example was the séance conducted on 19 July 1871 when there was sufficient daylight for sitters to see each other. After a materialization was heard to join the circle and touched Mrs Crookes, the accordion was played and Crookes recorded that, 'we had a beautiful accompaniment, the chirping and singing of the birds being heard along with the accordion'. Raps were heard and a luminous cloud appeared: 'Immediately the white luminous cloud was seen to travel...to Mrs Wm. C.'s hand, and a small sprig of the plant was put into it. She had her hand then patted by a delicate female hand...The table was now heard to be moving, and it was seen to glide slowly'. Later that month during another séance, the accordion was played and 'we heard a man's rich voice accompanying it in one corner of the room, and a bird whistling and chirping'.(5)

In addition to these phenomena, there were further abilities that distinguished Home from other mediums. One such feature was the elongation of his body by up to a foot in length. Another feat was his handling of pieces of coal taken from the fire. One witness who was present on such an occasion testified that Home was seen to take a 'red-hot coal...and carry it up and down the room'.(6) Many of those who attended Home's seances were initially sceptical; Inglis cited the view of Sir David Brewster, who after seeing Home's mediumship, believed that it had 'upset the philosophy of fifty years'. However, Brewster then argued that the phenomena had purely human origin; despite this change of opinion, his daughter supplied details of his own personal account of the séance when he detailed the events that included vibrations, rapping's, levitations of tables, partial-materializations, and a declaration these could not be accounted for by a this-worldly explanation. Why then had Brewster said that the phenomena could be explained? Simply, because by giving support to Home this: 'might have jeopardised his prospects. So he had chosen to smear Home. Four years later, he had enjoyed his reward when he was appointed to be Principal of Edinburgh University'.(7) It is an extraordinary and absurd situation that some choose to attend séances, in the knowledge that they will not vouch for the

genuineness of phenomena if they actually occur. Nonetheless, this was the type of behaviour that Home and many other mediums since Home's time have had to endure.

In the autumn of 1855, Home travelled to Florence, and his mediumship was witnessed by various personages during the period, e.g. Prince Murat, Napoleon III and the Empress Eugenie; the latter was convinced that her father had materialized in view of being able to identify a recognizable defect that he had on his hand that also appeared on the materialized form. Direct writing was also produced with Napoleon Bonaparte signing his name that the current Emperor declared was indeed Bonaparte's handwriting. In December 1855, an attempt was made against his life due to the reputation that he had gained as a necromancer. During the period while abroad, Home joined the Catholic Church and was received by Pope Pius IX, although this conversion was apparently short-lived, and he resumed his mediumship. Various rumours circulated while he was abroad to account for his powers; these included that he chloroformed his sitters, used the secret police to obtain information about them, that he received 'electrical power' from cats, and that he carried a monkey in his coat and this caused the movement object and the sensation of hands during séances.

When Home returned to Britain in 1859, he brought Alexandrina, his wife, having married in St. Petersburg; a son, Gregoire, was then born to them. By this time his status had increased considerably and he began to give regular séances, 'attended by many celebrities...and droves of peers and peeresses'.⁽⁸⁾ This particular period was also important as the newspapers began to deal with Home's mediumship with serious discussion. One person who participated in this was W. M. Thackeray; when challenged about his favourable view concerning Home's mediumship, he responded to his critics with a statement that many NAS members would find very apt when speaking to sceptics: 'It is all very well for you, who have probably never seen any spiritual manifestations, to talk as you do; but had you seen what I have witnessed, you would hold a different opinion'.⁽⁹⁾

For much of the twelve years following, Home resided in London; when his wife, who had been wealthy and contributed to his upkeep, died in 1862, he was forced to maintain himself by giving lectures and suchlike. He wrote *Incidents in My Life*, and then went to Rome to study to take up sculpturing; however, he was ordered to leave on the charge of sorcery. He therefore promised to stop mediumistic activity, but as this was not in his control and persisted, he was forced to leave papal territory, and returned to Britain in April 1864. In 1866, he received help from friends and supporters who founded the 'Spiritual Athenaeum' to support him. One of the more bizarre incidents in Home's colourful life was him being adopted by Mrs Lyon who then showered him with money and gifts. A short time later, Mrs Lyon decided to turn against Home and demand back what had been given to him; this resulted in a court case in 1868. There was considerable testimony against Mrs Lyon, but the onus of proof fell upon Home, and his mediumistic activities clearly brought about disfavour. Home lost, but what is noteworthy in the matter is the fact that so many people gave evidence of Home's mediumship and no accusation of fraud was proved. During the case, yet another attempt was made against his life.

The event that is best remembered of Home's mediumship is when, on 13 December 1868, Home floated out of the window of a third floor room in Ashley House, and then returned via another window to join the witnesses. This was achieved in the presence of Capt. Wynne, the Earl of Dunraven (at the time, Lord Adare) and the Earl of Crawford (at the time, Lord Lindsay). Various imaginative suggestions have been offered to account for, or rather explain away this feat, including the hypnotizing of those present, blackmail, or that Home had accomplices. As so often happens, there are those who feel able to supply various conjectural explanations, despite not even being there, but the weight of the testimony of those actually present cannot be so easily discounted. The event not only included Home levitating in mid-air, but even his method of exit was astonishing. After Home returned to the building, he took one of those present to the room from where he had made his earlier exit, and the witness recorded that the window was barely open by a foot and 'he then went through the open space, head first, quite rapidly, his body being nearly horizontal and apparently rigid. He then came in again, feet foremost...'.(10) The Earl of Dunraven described some of Home's activity during 1867-1869, in *Experiences with D. D. Home in Spiritualism*, that detailed the events of some eighty seances. In 1872, Home produced a second edition of *Incidents in My Life*, and this was followed by the publication of *Lights and Shadows of Spiritualism*.

Home's mediumship was not limited to activities such as levitation, etc, but an embracing of the next world, and producing evidence of survival. One example was the occurrence in November 1868, when Dannie Cox, a boy who had been known to the sitter, spoke through the entranced Home and said that he would manifest himself. Following this, the record reports, 'we heard a spirit come in and walk about the room; and perceived a light near the ceiling. Little Dannie Cox then came and...he bounced up and down on my feet, feeling just as heavy as a child of his age would if in the flesh...I saw him distinctly as a shadowy figure, of the same size as his mortal body'. In the same report, the Earl of Dunraven recorded how, in the séance held on 6 August 1868, a communicator spoke with Mrs Hennings, one of the sitters, and reminded her of a past experience and recalled details of the events: this had occurred some thirty years earlier. The communicator then added 'I mention this to satisfy you of my identity'. The account includes the observation that 'no one present knew of this incident and it had even escaped Mrs Hennings' memory until reminded of it'. Confirming the Spiritualism stance concerning animal survival (a view that distinguishes it from most other belief-systems in the western world), on 6 April 1869, when Home became entranced, a communicator spoke about a dog belonging to a woman who had sat with Home; it was stated her dog had died, and 'passed from earth; but she is not destroyed'. The writer added the note that Home 'could not have heard of its death, which took place between 10 and 11 o'clock'. In fact, the communication took place shortly after 11pm.(11) In addition to the physical phenomena that Home produced, there was a considerable amount of teaching imparted through his mediumship regarding the nature of the afterlife. The quality of evidence supplied by Home is demonstrated by Gauld's reference to him: even though Gauld believes that more evidence of survival arises from mental mediumship, he concedes that evidential communications can occur through physical mediumship and Home's mediumship is an example of this, i.e. he refers to a séance in 1870 when personal details were supplied to the sitters reducing one to tears.(12)

Home married for the second time in 1871, and again, his wife, Julie de Gloumeline, was a wealthy Russian. He ceased his mediumistic activities during the 1870s, and died on June 12, 1886, of tuberculosis, after suffering a long period of painful illness: his body was buried at St Germain-en-Laye. After his death, his wife wrote two books about him: *D. D. Home: His Life and Mission* (1888), and *The Gift of D. D. Home* (1890).

The number of séances that Home gave is estimated to have been in excess of fifteen hundred. Indeed, his abilities were 'witnessed on hundreds of occasions by kings and conjurers, scientists and socialites, priests and policemen' and no fraud was ever detected.(13) His mediumship produced phenomena 'at all times and seasons, under all sorts of conditions - in broad daylight, in artificial light, in semi-darkness...indoors, out of doors, in private houses, in hotels - at home and abroad'.(14) Unfortunately, it would appear there has been a disproportionate amount of interest in the more unusual features of Home's mediumship, rather than concentrating on communication and evidence of survival: features that must always be the central characteristic of Spiritualism and mediumship. Myers of the SPR noted that the main interest in Home was his telekinetic powers rather than securing evidence of the identities of communicators; he therefore added that 'it cannot but be deplored that the inestimable chance for experiment and record...was almost entirely thrown away by the scientific world'.(15) In fact, Home appears to have been yet another medium who demonstrated his talents to the wrong type of sitter. A consideration of his work gives the unmistakable impression that 'many of Home's sitters attended his seances merely for a stylish lark, with no deep convictions to be confirmed or challenged, and only a desire for amusement and novelty to motivate them'.(16)

With regard to claims of fraud, Home stands out in this respect also: Carrington mentioned how, and this is repeatedly stated, that Home was never exposed as a fraud,(17) and other writers, some hardly sympathetic to mediumship, are also forced to acknowledge this point.(18) In fact, Home was anxious to expose fraudulent mediums who brought the subject into disrepute, and in his *Lights and Shadows of Spiritualism*, he dealt with the question of fraudulent mediumship in some detail. In the case of attempts to reproduce the physical phenomena that occurred with Home: 'Prominent stage magicians such as Harry Houdini, John Nevil Mackelyne, and John Mulholland claimed that they could duplicate Home's feats but never did. Houdini announced he would duplicate Home's levitation at Lord Adare's home, but cancelled the event'.(19)

An adequate summary of Home's mediumistic abilities is surely supplied by Gauld: 'What is so astonishing...about D. D. Home is the sheer number of seemingly disinterested persons who were prepared to testify that he had in good or passable light produced startling phenomena before their very eyes'. Furthermore, in respect of Home effecting the phenomena by deception, Gauld argues that in view of what occurred, 'they could hardly have been the work of conjuring'; and with regard to hallucination/ hypnotism: 'It is true that not infrequently a phantom hand or a phantom figure would be visible only to some of the sitters...but so many of the other phenomena were observed on so many different occasions by so many different witnesses that the question of hallucination can in most cases hardly be raised'.(20) Podmore, who was hardly one for giving any credit to physical mediums, noted that

while Home suffered from vanity (the Earl of Dunraven also noted this, believing that it was necessary as a defence-mechanism against the invective suffered), he believed the impression gained by the people who met Home was 'of a highly emotional, joyous, childlike nature, full of generous impulses, and lavish affection to all comers'. Moreover, Home 'professed a fervent belief in his own mission as a teacher of the truth of immortality'.(21) Surely, there really can be no doubt that he fulfilled that mission.

One example of this is when, in a séance with Home, a delighted sitter told the communicators how pleased they would have been 'had you lived' to witness the progress being made. In a blunt response to this sitter, the communicators retorted: 'We are not dead!'.(22)

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