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John Myers Physical Medium

The Mediumship of John Myers

The work of John Myers is possibly little-known as the activity of spirit/psychic photography has come to be viewed as dubious by many. Nonetheless, in the case of this medium, Maurice Barbanell states that in his career of investigating Spiritualism, he had not encountered 'a more dramatic example of what spirit power can achieve'.(1) In fact, although the name of John Myers is almost wholly linked to the activity of spirit photography, his mediumship also included remarkable healing and clairvoyance.

Barbanell only heard of John shortly before the *Psychic News* began in 1932. This was after a test séance in which John successfully brought about 'extras' in the photographs that were taken. In John's dental surgery in London, with nine persons present, A. W. Palfrey broke the seals of some photographic plates that he had purchased, and loaded them into slides: 'All that Myers was allowed to do was to release the shutter of the camera. Palfrey alone handled the plates and their development'.(2) When the photographs were developed, two 'extras' were included on them. On hearing about the incident, Barbanell became interested in John's work and subsequently met him on many occasions. Of his knowledge of John, Barbanell states; 'Technically, he knew nothing about photography, and this ignorance of the subject still largely obtains today'.(3)

Events during John's childhood were clearly relevant to what would follow. At the age of five, living in East London, he was bitten by a rabid dog and almost died. After lapsing into a coma and delirium, his family gathered around him, awaiting his death. However, he suddenly recovered and 'to the doctor, the boy's dramatic recovery was capable of no medical explanation'.(4) It was after this event that John began to be aware of another world and its inhabitants, that could not be seen by others e.g. he saw children, and a woman whom he described as his guardian angel'.

Years later, John saw a notice by the Victoria Psychic Research Society and attended one of its meetings. A number of factors then occurred that made him consider and pursue the subject. One of the significant events was when he attended a séance by Mrs. Deane, a spirit photographer: the séance was a failure and John asked whether he might try to bring about some results, and on doing this, extras appeared on the plates. The Society was willing to help him and consequently formed a circle to achieve this.

All the members of the circle tried to obtain results but without success: 'All, that is, except Myers. On plate after plate that he exposed were clear-cut indications of psychic markings for which there was no normal explanation'.⁽⁵⁾ Most important was the fact that on one of the plates, an image appeared and was identified as that of a woman who had died some weeks earlier. Indicative of the importance of John's ability, is that an account of what he was achieving was published on the front page of the very first issue of *Psychic News*.

Shortly afterwards, Barbanell sent A. W. Austen, a sceptical journalist to undergo a test with John. Austen purchased plates that he kept in his possession until they were placed into the camera; this was done in his presence, as was the development. Additionally, each plate was signed when loaded. In the presence of a number of people, including Barbanell and Austen, John exposed the plates. After the first one was blank, he then walked about the room in a semi-trance and further ones were exposed. During this time, he referred to persons whom he believed were attempting to communicate; one of these was someone whom Barbanell had known.

John gave the person's name and other pieces of personal information by which he could be identified. The plates were then taken away to be developed; on one, the image of the very person to whom John had referred was present. Barbanell goes on to report how: 'this result gave Austen's scepticism a mortal blow, for there was no normal explanation as to how... [the] face could have appeared on the plate'. Moreover, 'the plates, which he had bought, had never been out of his sight'.⁽⁶⁾

A further test was then conducted with members of the Press Portrait Bureau. They were to purchase the plates and be present when loaded, together with signing them and monitoring the development. Before the test, John advised Barbanell that he believed the playwright, Edgar Wallace, would make himself known and asked for Hannen Swaffer, who had known Wallace, to be present at the test. This took place with the two representatives of the Press Portrait Bureau, who not only took all the precautions outlined, but, without informing others who were involved, went further and marked the plates as well as signing them to ensure they could not be exchanged with any others. Photographs were then taken and when they were developed, 'there was a perfect likeness of Wallace'.

As claims were made that spirit photography simply made use of already-existing photographs, Barbanell then made a challenge that a similar photograph of Wallace, taken before his death, be produced. As Barbanell reported: 'Nobody could have done so, or has done so since'. He went on to add how, 'at an Estelle Roberts séance, not long afterwards, Wallace communicated and gleefully referred to his accomplishment'.(7) As an example of the importance of what had occurred, the Daily Express reported the incident on its front page.

Apart from the sensation that John was causing, he, as a medium, provided assurance of survival to those who were grieving for loved ones who had died. In one case, Sidney Arnold sat with John, and Arnold's late wife appeared on the photograph prompting Arnold to say that through John's mediumship, he had received 'the indisputable likeness of my wife', and 'his psychic power is unique in its achievements'.(8)

Barbanell cites numerous cases of sitters receiving photographs that included images of those of who had died. One instance was when Dr Gaster, the Chief Rabbi of the Sephardic Community in England, who applauded John's mediumship: he provided a statement referring to the images of those who appeared for him and a Mrs. Blumenthal. In the case of the latter, her father was 'clearly recognizable' in the photograph.(9)

John accepted a challenge from the Marques of Donegal, details of which were supplied by Will Goldston, a leading magician, who was also present: the account was published in *Psychic News* (15 October, 1932). The Marques had offered to make a payment if John was successful, but the medium, while agreeing to the test, declined the offer of payment. In the test, John had no involvement in the purchase of the photographic plates, nor even in the loading or the development. All that was required of him was to be present when the photographs were taken. After purchasing the plates, the Marques went with Harry Folkard, the art editor of the *Sunday Dispatch*, who was to develop the pictures, to the location of the test.

On arriving, the Marques went with John to load the plates in a dark room, with John having no contact with them. Each plate was signed by the Marques as they were loaded into the slides which were then placed into his pocket. Folkard examined the camera and confirmed that he was satisfied it was in order and then set this up with the plates from the Marques's pocket. John then went into a light trance and described next-world visitors whom he could see; his presence there only serving as the means by which the phenomena could occur.

Each exposure was of a lengthy period of time that should have caused the photographs to be blackened. As each one was taken, the Marques numbered the plate and as stated, John did not come into direct contact with them. The Marques and Folkard then developed the photographs. One had some form of extra, but because of its vagueness, was dismissed. Another had an image on it

that Goldston said, 'tallies closely with the description that was given to us [by John]'. In the case of the sixth, there was the image of 'two very striking faces of women. They are clear and beautifully formed...To sum up, we may say that Myers' claims were fully substantiated by our sitting'.(10)

The Marques was mystified by what he had seen, and requested a further demonstration: however, at this, events took place that led to a long-running and bitter disagreement. The Marques accused John of being a fraud as he believed that he had substituted the plates, although this was not based on actually seeing such a thing, but simply hearing the sound of glass upon glass. Not surprisingly, John was dumbfounded at the accusation, particularly as the Marques claimed to be an unbiased researcher. Furthermore, as Barbanell points out, apart from the Marques not even seeing what he claimed John had done, the medium lacked a part of his right hand that would have been necessary for any deceit such as the switching of plates to have been carried out. Fortunately, despite this event, John's mediumship continued and thrived.(11)

John's mediumship was particularly interesting as it was sometimes possible for sitters to verify the visual communications with other mediums. One such example was when Mr. and Mrs. Farebrother had a sitting with John and their eldest son appeared in the photograph taken. Later, during a sitting with Estelle Roberts, Jackie, their youngest son, communicated and mentioned that he had attempted to show himself on the photograph but had been unsuccessful; he further added that on the next occasion he would succeed. When Mr. and Mrs. Farebrother had another sitting with John, 'To their great delight Jackie kept his promise'.(12)

In 1935, R. Laurence Parish, a wealthy American businessman, became aware of the publicity surrounding John and contacted Barbanell to enquire about having a sitting with the medium. This was arranged, and after a preliminary sitting, Parish asked that he have another sitting in which he would 'handle every part of the process from loading the camera to taking the pictures, developing the plates and making the prints'. John agreed to this and the sitting took place in the Savoy Hotel and 'the results turned out to be even superior to those obtained with Myers' camera.

The pictures were more distinct, both as regards the subject and the extras'.(13) A further development occurred when Parish asked whether John would assist him with an ailment that had greatly troubled him for some ten years, together with the progressive worsening of his sight. John said that he would attempt to help, and in both cases, Parish was cured within a few days of meeting John for the healing.

Parish, naturally impressed by John's mediumship, suggested that he go to America to demonstrate his mediumship, and also join him in his business activities. Encouraged by Barbanell to take up the offer, John departed to

continue his career abroad. It was not long before he demonstrated his remarkable skill in healing there: one notable instance was Perry Moran who suffered from a spinal injury that was steadily worsening, and even with morphine, was often unable to move about. In front of witnesses, John visited Moran in his hotel room and 'touched his leg, foot, spine, and asked him to try and walk...Of his own accord Moran walked around the room and out into the hall...'. Consequently, 'the talk about this cure spread like wild fire. Soon the Hotel was ablaze with excitement. Newspapers wanted to have the story'. In fact people were even enquiring about whether 'there was "an English Jesus Christ in the hotel" (14)

As noted, confirmation of the authenticity of John's mediumship was given through the medium Estelle Roberts. She confirmed that, 'on several occasions, through my direct-voice mediumship, spirit communications confirmed that they had appeared on John's spirit photographs'.(15) In Barbanell's 'He Walks in Two Worlds', detailing John's work, Estelle supplies details of several instances of when John's mediumship was verified in communications that were unconnected with the spirit photography. An example was when E. A. Reeves, a geographer who often sat with Estelle: on one occasion, Gino Watkins, an explorer who had died while on expedition in Greenland and someone well-known to Reeves in view of his work in the Royal Geographical Society, communicated.

This was followed by Watkins appearing on a plate during a test sitting given by John at the British College of Psychic Science; the photograph was shown to Reeves and he 'had no doubt that it was Watkins'. Only a short time later, Estelle, unaware of the earlier incident was giving a sitting in which Reeves was present. His son communicated and referred to how Watkins had succeeded in getting 'his picture through'.(16)

One of those who had the benefit of sitting with John was Fodor, a New York psychoanalyst and psychic researcher. Barbanell refers to how he had been left unimpressed with what he had witnessed in his research, but 'his outlook, however, dramatically changed when Myers invited him to a demonstration'. (17) In Fodor's Encyclopaedia of Psychic Science, he mentions how extras would appear on plates while John was in a light trance. There is also reference to the Marques of Donegal's accusation in the second sitting that he had with John, but Fodor says that while this did cast a cloud over John's mediumship, this 'left part of his previous admissions unaffected'.(18)

Publicity of John's mediumship resulted in the medium appearing on television. After seeking Barbanell's view about whether he should do this - something that Barbanell did encourage him to do - he took part, but rather than being a discussion of his mediumship, it became a test of same. During this time, the interviewer, who had purchased photographic papers at a shop unknown to John, discovered that extras had appeared even though John had no physical

contact with them. Even more startling was that fact that, 'all the extras appeared as negatives instead of positives, thus reversing the normal process'.(19)

The name of John Myers is one that can undoubtedly be associated with both spectacular physical phenomena and the evidence these can supply. In 1964, Barbanell completed his book about John's mediumship, and he rightly summarizes John as someone who 'continues to be that rarity among human beings, one who walks in two worlds at the same time'. (20)

References.

- (1) M. Barbanell, *He Walks in Two Worlds* (London: Herbert Jenkins, 1964). p. 12.
- (2) Barbanell, *ibid.* p.15.
- (3) Barbanell, *ibid.* p.16.
- (4) Barbanell, *ibid.* p.153.
- (5) Barbanell, *ibid.* p.19.
- (6) Barbanell, *ibid.* p.24.
- (7) Barbanell, *ibid.* p.29.
- (8) *Cit.*, Barbanell, *ibid.* p.32.
- (9) Barbanell, *ibid.* p.33.
- (10) Barbanell, *ibid.* pp.39, 40.
- (11) Barbanell, *ibid.* p.42.
- (12) Barbanell, *ibid.* p.44.
- (13) Barbanell, *ibid.* p.50.
- (14) Barbanell, *ibid.* p.59, 63.
- (15) *Cit.*, Barbanell, *ibid.* p.81.
- (16) Barbanell, *ibid.* p.83.
- (17) Barbanell, *ibid.* p.86.
- (18) N. Fodor, *Encyclopaedia of Psychic Science* (London: Arthur's Press, 1933), p. 262.
- (19) Barbanell, *Op. Cit.*, p.139.
- (20) Barbanell, *ibid.* p.157.

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