

The Scole Event

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A prefatory note:

Ever since serious scientific examination of the evidence for post-mortem communications began in the late 1860s with studies of the internationally famous medium, Daniel Home, psychical researchers have been challenging the reliability of evidence of a claim so profoundly at variance with generally recognised physical laws. They have found themselves obliged to recognise that not all can be ascribed to conjuring, hallucination, poor memory, wishful thinking and similar hypotheses assembled to provide increasingly less plausible explanations for apparent miracles. So the argument has become a battlefield between those who accept the intrusion of spirit into our mundane domain, and those who go no further than to ascribe to some aspect of the human psyche the physical and mental phenomena loosely called paranormal.

The modern generation may be forgiven for associating psychical research exclusively with laboratory-based experiments governed by the sort of controls with which scientists are familiar and dispensers of research grants comfortable: experiments susceptible to probability quantification in terms of chance expectation. This has indeed been the pattern of most research work in the field ever since J B Rhine's pioneering work in the 1930s. Irreconcilable though it may be with a strictly materialist philosophy, little of this work has required an explanation invoking the concept of spirits or the embarrassment of a soul. The field has been largely occupied by psychologists concerned with the nature and functions of the incarnate mind, at least for those who have managed to make the ontological leap from brain to consciousness. The less they find themselves dragged into the occult mysteries of departed spirits, the greater their chances of quiet infiltration into the ranks of orthodoxy.

While widespread and commonplace, evidence of the paranormal based on spontaneous phenomena is inherently ill-suited to the normal procedures of scientific investigation. Ghosts notoriously fail to appear on demand; poltergeists manage to ensure that their stone-throwing or picture-shifting activities may be seen in motion, and thereby provide mere anecdotal evidence, but never when initiated. The precognition of unknowable events is spectacular when unpremeditated, but it teeters on the boundary of statistical insignificance when straitjacketed into a mass card-calling test. And when it, or experiments in psychokinesis (moving objects at a distance), do show chance to be a strikingly improbable explanation, critical statisticians get to work to repudiate the chosen protocol.

All this has given rise to the assiduously propagated report that more than a century of investigation by the Society for Psychical Research, the senior organisation dedicated to the scientific investigation of the paranormal has failed to produce convincing evidence of the existence of a psychic faculty.

This belief is not only false but ludicrous. The evidence for such commonplace examples of the paranormal as telepathy, distant viewing (clairvoyance) and psychokinesis was overwhelming long before laboratory tests became the norm. Even before the end of the 19th century, the examination by sceptical and cautious investigators of the trance medium Leonore Piper had established to all but the most obtuse minds her ability to reveal correct

information unknown to her or to the sitter, information at a level of accuracy and detail which ruled out guesswork or chance. Did this faculty emerge from her subliminal mind, or was one forced to accept that it derived from discarnate intelligences formerly resident on earth?

To many observers, this has remained the central issue of psychical research for the past century, and it has been largely by-passed by the essentially psychologically-fixated experiments in PSI which have long dominated the parapsychological agenda. Given the mounting evidence of mediumistic communications so precise and unknowable, can one reasonably extend the attribution of our psychic faculty to account for a message which reveals the location of a secret drawer in which can be found a hitherto unknown will, or plots the route taken by a missing person in a foreign country?

A crucial test of this hypothesis began soon after the deaths of two of the most distinguished founders of the SPR, when fragments of messages, each meaningless in isolation, began to emerge independently from different mediums in different locations. Great skill and classical knowledge was required by those who sought to piece these disparate clues together so that they not only made sense but provided evidence that a group of former colleagues were succeeding in communicating the verities of the next world, in a manner clearly detached from the psyche of any individual medium.

Although these cross-correspondences continued for more than thirty years, providing what many experts believe constitute the most formidable body of evidence yet assembled for discarnate communication, their complexity and occasional ambiguity have consigned them to near oblivion. Ask any critic of the paranormal to account for the evidence of the cross-correspondences, and you can be assured of bewilderment or, at best, ignorant dismissal.

Scale: how it started

This lengthy prelude is required if we are to make sense of the Scale phenomena. They began almost 70 years after the cross-correspondences started to peter out. The central figure was Robin Foy, a specialist in the paper industry. For quarter of a century he has dedicated his spare time to reviving the near extinct practice of physical phenomena in the séance room. In 1993 he and his wife Sandra started a small domestic group in a conveniently roomy cellar of their old rented house in the Norfolk village of Scale. They soon established contact with what purported to be a team of communicators invariably introduced by an entity called Manu. These spoke chiefly through a husband and wife couple both of whom remained in deep trance throughout the two or even three hour proceedings. Shortly thereafter the physical manifestations began. It was not until the end of 1994 that their activities, and claims, came to more public attention, since the Group, by that time comprising six people had been encouraged by their trusted Team to launch a newsletter, with the somewhat ambitious title of the New Spiritual Scientist, to tell the world of the new wonders.

I met the Group early in 1995 as an informal emissary not of the Society for Psychical Research, on whose Council I serve as secretary to the Survival Committee, but of a hybrid body set up between leading psychical researchers and prominent spiritualists eager to put mediumship investigation on a sound scientific footing. Subsequently the SPR took a keen interest in the claims and provided modest funding to meet some of the costs involved in their protracted investigation. The prominence of my role thenceforth was occasioned

primarily by the fact that I lived nearer to Scole than any of the other investigators. We were shown a wide range of apports, and a still more impressive collection of pictures taken in the dark, some with cameras held by the conscious members of the Group, some by spirit entities themselves appearing to operate the cameras, and some without any cameras at all. We had to satisfy the Group that we were serious and positive: a negative or hostile approach would in their view - and ours - have been far less likely to encourage the production of phenomena.

Our chief aim was to ensure that, so far as compatible with whatever limits the spirits worked under, the controls were sufficient to preclude deception. This was made clear from the start. We wanted one, preferably two video cameras using the infra red spectrum, to monitor events, but were told that this would seriously inhibit the work, and that it was their intention to bring their own light eventually. Professor Arthur Ellison, a former SPR president, the late Ralph Noyes, then hon. secretary of the SPR, attended the first two sittings with me towards the end of 1995. Ralph thereafter yielded place to Professor David Fontana, the then current SPR president, having satisfied himself that he had been conversing with real personalities, not some figment of the mediums' sub-conscious minds.

What had persuaded the cautiously critical Noyes was a combination of the distinctive and intelligent personalities of the communicators, notably the forceful Mrs Emily Bradshaw, and the brilliance and variety of the lights, which none of us could attribute to human manipulation. These were to be a feature of most of the early sittings, until concentration on the production of films commandeered the available time and energy. Light phenomena were invariable when the Group had overseas sittings in unfamiliar locations and before substantial numbers of sitters, however. Among the varied activities of the lights were extremely rapid movements, shape changes, responses to sitters' requests to visit and touch their hands, hitting suspended strings of bells, glass jars or the table top with a resounding 'ping', entering and seeming to move around inside sitters, according to their reports, irradiation and levitation of crystals, suffusing with glowing light the six perspex supports of a central plinth carrying a glass dome, and extremely precise high speed geometrical gyrations.

Perhaps the most remarkable, not simply because it was linked with a dematerialisation act, was the event that finally overwhelmed any lingering doubts harboured by Arthur Ellison about the authenticity of what he was experiencing. It occurred when a small point of light settled on and irradiated one of the four crystals located at the cardinal points on the periphery of the circular table round which the investigators and the Group sat. The three visitors saw, and described for the benefit of the tape recorder (all sittings were recorded and later transcribed) how the glowing crystal then rose before our eyes, and descended into the base of a translucent perspex kitchen bowl from which Arthur was invited to abstract it and replace it. He did so, bending low over the bowl to ensure that no human hand or instrument was at work. He was then asked to repeat the process, only to find that the image of the crystal was simply that: a non-material but clearly visible essence. This experiment was at our request repeated for the benefit of the two other investigators. All experienced the phenomenon of de-materialisation and re-materialisation of the crystal.

The sittings extended over a period of nearly two years, giving the observers ample time to ensure that, despite some distinctly unsatisfactory aspects, no fraud was being perpetrated. In this they were helped by several factors. One was the luminous Velcro-adhering wrist bands worn by each member of the Group, specifically to enable visitors to detect any arm

movement. It would have been difficult, but perhaps not impossible, for one or more of the group to remove and later replace them without being noticed; but their absence would of itself constitute a further risk of exposure. The more frequently this was done, the more likely that some observer sooner or later would challenge them. No one has done so. Then there were the physical obstructions constituted by the chairs and their sitters. This may not have been an insuperable difficulty when only three or four investigators were present, but when the group periodically invited ten persons to attend briefings and so-called seminar sittings, the cellar was too crowded to allow anyone to move around, let alone do so without detection. And yet many people apart from the investigators sitting opposite the Group reported being touched or stroked on arms, legs, faces and hair in a small room to which no one could have gained entry. Even if we ignore these not inconsiderable precautions or safeguards, we still have to conceive of any method by which the extremely wide range of light phenomena could have been operated manually while intelligent conversation continued through the mediums under suspicion. There were, in addition, the occasional hands, made visible by spirit lights which fondled ours, floating semi-transparent angelic forms (for want of a less presumptuous description), and odd apports.

What was the point of all this? Hardly to elevate the spiritual status of the participants! Clearly it was intended to convince us that these were genuine manifestations of spirit energy, intelligently directed, interacting with us at every stage, confirming predictive statements made by the spirit communicators and preparing us for the more durable evidence we were seeking, evidence susceptible to examination outside the séance room, and divorced from subjective interpretation and the fallibility of human observation and recollection.

The principal instrument was in the films. There were fifteen in all created during our investigation. Nearly all were attended by slightly different protocols. Most of the films were rolls of 35mm Polaroid which could be developed on the spot via an electrical development machine using chemical cartridges; some were Kodachrome, developed at Kodak's plant in Wimbledon. Normally films were bought and handled throughout by the investigators, sometimes sealed in a plastic security bag, which the spirit communicators found it difficult but not impossible to penetrate; more often in a padlocked box placed on the séance room table or held in an investigator's hand. Almost invariably the films remained untouched in their original tubs until taken out for development. The experiments were not always successful. Those which worked proved spectacular, the images being spread over most of the length of the roll. Some were deliberately aimed at setting us puzzles, and linking the message on the film with the preceding and succeeding discussions with the communicating 'Team'.

Among the first was a clearly printed stanza of a poem by Myers, along with various references, in French and Greek, to his obituary notice by Oliver Lodge, together with a word which gave a clue to the first cross-correspondence, of which the deceased Myers was always believed to be the author. Discussions with the 'Team' included many references to some of Myers' contemporaries and to passages in ancient SPR Proceedings. Among the more interesting film images was a beautifully but anachronistically scripted German poem of the early Victorian era whose authorship is still unknown, and which is believed never to have been published. Two other films, created during successive sittings, reproduced in handwriting remarkably similar to that of Dorothy Wordsworth, stanzas amending one of her brother's less well known lyrical poems for what turned out to be the ephemeral edition

of 1802, amendments whose emotional significance for the poet warranted detailed investigation and provides a piece of literary detection of unique interest.

The fact that the authors devote some 240 pages to their report to the Society* indicates how varied and extensive the phenomena were. They includes experiments in electronic voice recording via a specially built, if primitive type of semi-conductor which culminated in an audible performance of Rachmaninoff's Second Piano Concerto recorded on a machine from which the microphone had been removed, and the production of varied images on a blank videotape in a camcorder focussing on a mirror reflecting a brown ceiling. No less significant was the ability of communicators through the mediums, or occasionally by direct voice, to respond to questions by giving information most unlikely to have been within the knowledge of the medium. Requests from the investigators that images which they themselves might specify should be produced by the communicating team were met with the objection that their aim was to provide evidence of their own discarnate thought-impressions, not ours. If, as appeared to be the case, the object was to produce better and simpler evidence to defeat the super PSI theory, this reaction was irritatingly logical.

The circumstances in which the sittings came to an unexpected end, while mentioned in our report, and both puzzling and frustrating in their abruptness, form no part of the evidence. I myself sat with the Group in three countries and through 28 sessions, and neither heard nor saw anything suspicious. Many others have given similar testimonies, not least at the discussion day organised by the SPR in December 1999 within days after the belated publication of the report.

We had pointed out that the task of assessing authenticity was simplified by the black-or white alternative. There could be no question of occasional cheating, or of producing information buried in the forgotten memory, since fraud would have involved careful planning, timing, dexterity and co-ordination. We had naively assumed that the cumulative weight of evidence, and the sheer improbability that everything was based on deception would have convinced all but the most obtuse that we were dealing with a genuine phenomenon, so that we could then concentrate on the more important questions: of mechanism, motivation and message. We were talking, we believed, to intelligent, coherent personalities, not laboriously coaxing affirmatives and negatives from a rapping table or a pendulum. We engaged in sensible discussions on the limitations and prospects of semi-conductors, arising out of questions about the way in which disembodied minds could physically influence the ferrous oxide film on the tape; on the use to which germanium could be put; of the inversion of one of the Rachmaninoff/Paganini variations or the impending recording of Elgar's enigmatic Nimrod variation in the background music; and of the significance of Diotima's advice to Socrates in Plato's Symposium. Hardly the normal stuff of séance room discussion.

It was disturbing to discover that some of our most senior colleagues found themselves unable to get past the first stage, dedicating themselves to pointing to the admitted weaknesses in some aspects of the controls, but diligently ignoring those features which individually or cumulatively made the case for authenticity overwhelming. Those who read the report in its entirety, and note the replies given to the critics' contributions published alongside it, will, I believe endorse a view clearly echoing the overwhelming reaction of the Study Day audience in their reception of Dr Crawford Knox's contribution, which he forcefully summarises in these pages.

*The Scole Report: Proceedings SPR Vol. 58, Pt 220, with 18 plates, pages 150-392 with supplementary criticisms and responses. Available, price £10 from the SPR at 49 Marloes Road, W8 6LA

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