

# Geraldine Cummins

Geraldine Cummins (1890–1969) was an Irish medium who practised automatic writing. She published scripts said to originate with the deceased FWH Myers, Arthur Balfour, Franklin D Roosevelt, Winifred Coombe-Tennant and other discarnates, noteworthy for their accurate depiction of the individuals' style and personality. Other scripts claiming to describe the time of Christ and the Apostles were popular at the time but are seen as less impressive today.

## Introduction

Geraldine Dorothy Cummins was one of the eleven children (six boys and five girls) of Dr Ashley Cummins and his wife Jane. She was born on 24 January 1890 at 17 St Patrick's Place, Cork, and died in Cork of cancer on 25 August 1969.<sup>1</sup> The family claimed descent from the Ulster Clan Cumainn on the father's side and from the Aylmer family of Kildare on the mother's. As members of the Protestant Ascendancy, the family had a well-established social position in Cork, where the father held the chair of medicine at the University College. As well as the town house in Cork they had a substantial property, Woodville House, five miles away at Glanmire. Alone amongst her siblings (many of whom pursued medical and/or military careers) she did not go on to university and had a somewhat incomplete education. She hunted, was a good tennis player and played hockey for Ireland. She was enthusiastic about English and Irish literature, and as she grew older became a strong supporter of women's right to vote. Initially, her intention was to be a writer of novels and plays.<sup>2</sup> She was slim, small and diffident in manner. But this hid a character which was shrewd, thoughtful, compassionate and courageous.

Cummins showed no early childhood psychic gifts, unlike her other great contemporaries in [mediumship](#), [Eileen Garrett](#) and [Gladys Osborne Leonard](#). They developed after she formed relationships with two remarkable women: Hester Dowden, who helped her discover her talent, and Beatrice Gibbes, who later gave her the time and security to make use of them.<sup>3</sup>

Cummins met Dowden in Paris in June 1914, and they worked the Ouija board together. The resulting communications included one which particularly impressed Cummins by showing knowledge of the private life of a deceased cousin of hers (the Pearl-Tie Pin case).<sup>4</sup> For part of World War I she lived with Dowden as a paying guest while working in Dublin at the National Library. When, later, she lived with Gibbes, her main psychic technique became automatic writing (though she still occasionally used the Ouija board) since this was less cumbersome and allowed for a more vivid and detailed expression of the character and personality of the 'discarnate'.

Beatrice Gibbes was a wealthy woman who had travelled widely and was a member of the Royal Geographical Society. She also had a keen interest in psychical research: when she met Cummins in 1923 she offered her the use of her home at 25 Jubilee Place, Chelsea in return for regular sittings.<sup>5</sup> Henceforth, Cummins divided her time between there and her mother's farm at Glanmire. The pair collaborated

until Gibbes's death in 1951, interrupted only by illness and the pressures of World War II, Cummins writing, Gibbes recording, storing, checking, and verifying the material. The partnership produced some of the most remarkable automatic writing in existence.<sup>6</sup>

Gibbes bequeathed Cummins a life-interest in the London property until her death. But unlike Gladys Leonard, Cummins did not earn a living from her sittings: her income was limited to her writing, the family farm, and occasional help from patrons of psychical research. Her plays (despite being staged at the Abbey Theatre Dublin), novels and short stories had limited sales,<sup>7</sup> so her main source of revenue was from her transmitted writings (the term she preferred to 'automatic writing'). In later life she assiduously pursued publishers for royalties, especially those in the US.<sup>8</sup>

Cummins's sitters tended to be middle and upper-middle class: they included David Gray, a US ambassador to Eire; [William Lyon Mackenzie King](#), a Canadian prime minister; Gerald, Second Earl of Balfour; and [Oliver Lodge](#). But Gibbes generally admitted those who had the greatest need, regardless of background.

## Process

In her book *Swan on a Black Sea*, Cummins described the processes involved in her automatic writing in some detail. She stated that there should be something relevant to the sitter to stimulate the desire to communicate. The essential point was to create a stillness in which the mind listened carefully for the words that were to be dictated to it. Sometimes she did an exercise beforehand to will, to desire, to imagine in order to prepare for contact. If a sitter was present there should be no talking; general conversation before the session would interfere with the purity of her channel. Occasionally a blank sitting resulted because her sensitivity was paralysed by the sitter's subconscious prejudice.<sup>9</sup>

Cummins contrasted the speed of her psychical writings – two thousand words in just over an hour – with the laborious day's work required to produce eight hundred conscious words. In her autobiography she stated that 'her slow, conscious mind could not have invented these impersonations'. She described her condition as being dreamy, half-asleep, and a mere listener to the words coming through. Gibbes sometimes asked questions, but her main role was to replenish the paper as the writing hand came to the end of the page, and afterwards to go through the script in detail.<sup>10</sup> Cummins always stressed that she was not in deep trance (except very rarely), and retained consciousness awareness at some level; if at any time she disliked the communicator and/or the message, she stopped writing.<sup>11</sup>

## Oscar Wilde Scripts

Cummins was a part player in scripts purporting to originate with the deceased 'Oscar Wilde' that attracted wide publicity, to the extent that efforts were made to put on a play by 'Wilde' dictated through the Ouija board. She was present at most of the sittings in the summer of 1923, when the combined automatic writing of [SG Soal](#) – sometimes with his brother SW Soal and Hester Dowden, and Dowden

operating the Ouija board – produced messages from ‘Oscar Wilde’.<sup>12</sup> Cummins’s role was mainly that of recorder, but the curious episode sheds helpful contextual light on her personality and beliefs.

Cummins stated in her autobiography that additional material was not included in that book: the three-act drama from ‘Wilde’ alluded to above, and personal reminiscences of his that were beyond the knowledge of Dowden, Cummins, or either of the Soal brothers.<sup>13</sup> However, Mackie has demonstrated the Soal brothers’ dissatisfaction with that rather sweeping and simplistic conclusion.<sup>14</sup> This suggests, not a challenge to Cummins’s honesty or integrity, but the need to examine with great care all the statements she made about a medium’s prior access or exposure, however fleeting or tangential, to the content of scripts claimed as paranormally transmitted.

## Scripts of Cleophas

Cummins started to receive the writings that were later called the Scripts of Cleophas in December 1923. These purported to be accounts by Christians who lived in the first century after Christ’s death.<sup>15</sup> They originated ultimately with Cleophas (possibly Cleopas of Luke 24), a individual said to be so remote from Earth that he needed the aid of messengers and Cummins’s Christian control Silenio to convey the narrative. She wrote these scripts in a light trance. Her description of producing some of them in front of a number of clergymen demonstrated features that were consistent throughout her life, particularly the speed of the writing and her intense absorption.

There were six volumes of Cleophas scripts, recounting events in the period from the Acts of the Apostles to the death of St Paul. They impressed a number of Biblical scholars; others such as [Walter Franklin Prince](#) and Butterworth made less favourable judgements.<sup>16</sup> There was disagreement as to how specialized and arcane was the knowledge of the early Christian church that the scripts displayed and whether the language and content was appropriate for that period.

Cummins produced two other books of automatic writing which described the childhood and manhood of Christ.<sup>17</sup> Two other great automatists, Hester Dowden and [Pearl Curran](#), also produced automatic writing through the Ouija board that centred on the period of Christ. The work of all three was popular given the climate of the time, and the religious content might have blunted a critical evaluation.<sup>18</sup> The content, style and tone of some of Cummins’s religious automatic writings have, however, impressed some later commentators.<sup>19</sup>

## FWH Myers Scripts

In the early 1920s, Cummins began to produce scripts ostensibly from [Frederic WH Myers](#), a co-founder of the [Society for Psychical Research](#) and one of its leading investigators and thinkers, who died in 1901. At this time, Cummins and Gibbes stated, they had heard of Myers but knew very little about him. Cummins, in fact, explicitly wrote: ‘I had not read his books nor had I met anyone who knew him at the time these scripts were written.’<sup>20</sup> The scripts were published in two books: *The*

*Road to Immortality* (1932) and *Beyond Human Personality* (1935). The first book is short, the second more substantial. Both cover the central theme of humankind's progression after death: the averagely-decent soul first inhabits an illusory world which reassuringly resembles their earthly existence and gradually progresses to higher spiritual levels interspersed by a number of reincarnations.<sup>21</sup> Further stages of spiritual growth may take place on other stars in the solar system and in a physical form quite unlike their earthly body.<sup>22</sup> Thoroughly nasty individuals are said to quickly reincarnate in disadvantageous situations.

Several of Myers's friends, including Oliver Lodge, testified to a certain resemblance in vocabulary and style to Myers's writing in life. Myers's widow, uncharacteristically given her hostility to mediums claiming to make contact with her 'Fred', warmly welcomed the first book and bought copies to give to her friends.<sup>23</sup> But the second book's mystical elements made a number of readers question its origins. With a lack of factual information to cross-check, such material can seem a pastiche of the vigour and the panache of the author's writing style in life (as is also the case with communications allegedly made by [William James](#) post-mortem).

Raynor Johnson called these scripts 'foundation sources' for his belief in survival and the nature of life after death. He argued that the speed and fluency of the writing suggested an external control, and that Myers's character and style as evidenced in the scripts was yet another example of Cummins's ability to accurately reproduce the character and style of discarnate communicators whom she had never met. He claimed that Lodge, sitting with Gladys Leonard and allegedly in communication with the deceased Myers, had got Myers to admit that he had communicated with Cummins, albeit imperfectly (hence some form of cross-reference/correspondence characteristic of Myers).

Johnson was also impressed by the fact, pointed out by Gibbes, that terms in the scripts such as 'polyzoic', 'metetheric' and 'polypsychic', were not known by them until they later found them in his book *Human Personality*. Johnson added a further piece of evidence, discovering that a phrase in *Beyond Human Personality* which Gibbes had been confused by – 'Love enclosed in Wisdom is the energy of integration which makes a cosmos of the sum of things' – appeared almost in its entirety in *Human Personality*. He also argued that the stages of post-mortem spiritual progression described in the scripts correlates with those from other highly regarded sources.<sup>24</sup>

Two specific concepts mentioned in the books – the idea of the group soul and the nature of the etheric body after death – were well and fluently expressed by 'Myers', and have impressed later psychical researchers such as Archie Roy and [Robert Crookall](#).<sup>25</sup> However, they might well have been drawn from early Theosophical and Spiritualist literature, which Cummins would have known through her reading of the periodical *Occult Review*.

## **Bligh Bond Copyright Case**

In 1926, the Cleophas scripts (described above) became the subject of a copyright dispute involving Bligh Bond, an architect who had been present during Cleophas

sittings and later typed up the scripts.<sup>26</sup> Earlier that year, Bond started to publish excerpts from the scripts in the *Christian Spiritualist* in January 1926. (Two decades earlier Bond had been involved in excavations in Glastonbury, working with an automatic writing medium to gain clues about where to dig.) Challenged by Cummins, he argued that the Cleophas scripts were addressed to him and that therefore he should have the copyright, 'spirits' having no such rights in the 'real' world. Given the substantial interest in literature of this type in the 1920s there were obvious financial motives on all sides. The case came to court, causing amusement in legal and literary circles, where, however, Bond's claim was dismissed.

## **Percy Fawcett Scripts**

In 1925 [Colonel Percy Fawcett](#) vanished while exploring the Amazon, along with his eldest son and his son's best friend.<sup>27</sup> In a sitting ten years later, Gibbes, a keen traveller and a member of the Royal Geographical Society, asked if Astor (Cummins's chief control) could trace him. The resulting scripts, purporting to originate with the deceased Fawcett, told a fantastic tale of their adventures, which included being captured by a tribe and living in a semi-conscious dreamlike state between life and death. Gibbes made extensive efforts to corroborate the details, but Cummins thought that much of the material could have been the subconscious product of Gibbes and Cummins herself.

Possibly supporting this conclusion was the discovery by Simeon Edwards that passages from Cummins's Fawcett scripts matched almost word for word an article by Fawcett that had appeared in the *Occult Review* in 1923.<sup>28</sup> This raises questions, not about Cummins's honesty – which even her most severe critics have rarely questioned – but about the power of her subconscious memory and its potential impact on the evidential value of her writing. The question is further complicated by conflicting accounts from later expeditions about the fate of these individuals and also by revelations by members of the Fawcett family suggesting that Fawcett had occult as well as scientific reasons for his expedition.<sup>29</sup>

## **Paranormal Prophecies**

The anxious years before World War II encouraged the more dubious element of Spiritualism and mediumship – the desire for prophecies giving reassurance about the future. Cummins's reputation in this difficult and uncertain field is mixed. In 1939 Gibbes circulated a record of 'prophetic scripts' written by Cummins, some of which was accurate, but could have been inferred by a careful reader of the press from the diplomatic situation. Other statements were quite wrong – for example, 'Remember No War', and 'I do not see humiliation for the British Empire' – suggesting a subconscious desire to give her sitters what they wanted to hear.<sup>30</sup>

## **Beatrice Gibbes and *Travellers in Eternity***

Some scripts, collected in *Travellers in Eternity* (1948), concern deceased relatives of Beatrice Gibbes, namely her brother Arthur and sister-in-law Hilda. Much of this material focuses on the couple's Sussex home Wickenden. Hilda was the daughter

of the financier Ludwig Messel who owned the fine house and garden of Nymans not far away. The book contains a foreword by Eric Parker, a writer on houses and gardens married to Ruth Messel, who died in 1933. *Travellers in Eternity* has a remarkable structural resemblance to Charles Drayton Thomas's *From Life to Life*, in which he tells the story, based on records of the sitter's ('Agnes') sittings with Gladys Leonard, of a comfortable upper middle-class family in late Victorian/Edwardian England who recreated their earthly lives together in the afterlife.[31](#)

The Leonard material was disguised by pseudonyms, but the introduction to the Cummins book by Gibbes contains enough information to identify the individuals and houses involved.[32](#) This casts doubt on the paranormal element in these communications, since the possibility of information originating from Gibbes herself cannot be discounted (always a problem with a regular sitter motivated by personal needs and concerns). Furthermore, the intimate family environment, to which Cummins must have had access, makes assessment of the scripts particularly difficult, although (with obvious qualifications) it can also make the evaluation of specific details not known to the automatist) more secure.

Gibbes argued that the scripts had a wider value, in that they clearly evidenced the survival of different individual characters consistently sustained and differentiated from others in the scripts in a most remarkable way. This she argued was Cummins's greatest talent – an ability to capture the essence of individual personalities. It should, however, be noted that Cummins herself helped Gibbes assemble the material for publication – a further breach in the wall of objectivity.[33](#)

## **Franklin Delano Roosevelt and David Gray Scripts**

During a sitting on 19 March 1945, a previously unknown communicator stated her name, Marguerite Le Hand, and her place of death, Chelsea, and said she wanted to give David a message about Frank. Gibbes and Cummins later identified David as David Gray, the US ambassador to Eire (for whom Cummins had given sittings before), and Frank as Franklin Delano Roosevelt, the US president who was related to Gray by marriage. In later scripts Le Hand provided a little more information about herself and her purpose in communicating, announcing that she wanted to warn David Gray that Frank was coming over, stating enigmatically 'There is more than one Chelsea in the world.' Gray confirmed by letter that Marguerite Le Hand had been Roosevelt's secretary and that she had died in Chelsea, Massachusetts. A further script accurately named Le Hand's successor as Boettiger and named a close friend of Roosevelt who had died as Edwin W. These points, confirmed at the time, are also supported by recent research.[34](#)

In a final session in Eire on 20 June, Cummins gave a sitting to Gray and his wife at which the now deceased 'Roosevelt' communicated. He described a last meal of gruel, which he detested, and the behaviour of his Scotch terrier at the funeral, facts which, again, were later verified by Gray.[35](#)

These details are impressive. However, as so often with Cummins, a critical assessment must examine the possibility that she obtained the information, not from the surviving minds of deceased individuals but by normal means or else by

clairvoyance, even taking into account the precise and intimate details displayed in the scripts with regard to occupation, character and personality. It is difficult to believe that in her contacts with Gray and her general reading, particularly that relating to so central a political figure as Roosevelt, relevant material had not filtered through to her subconscious to be creatively rehashed in her scripts. On the other hand, as she did with all her published material, Cummins explicitly drew attention to the limits of her prior knowledge in this case.[36](#)

Gray, who became a personal friend of Cummins and wrote a positive introduction in her autobiography, took her gifts very seriously. He had sittings with her in June, November and December 1941 and then again in October 1943. The material contained intimate family and political details beyond Cummins's normal knowledge, some in communications said to come from the discarnate Theodore Roosevelt and [Arthur Balfour](#); these included warnings about pro-German isolationist movements in the US and German collaborators in Eire. Gray forwarded accounts of the sittings to Roosevelt, and it has been suggested that they had a significant impact on US/Eire relationships.[37](#) On the other hand, a prediction in early December 1941 with regard to Japanese military intentions – stating, 'I see no immediate Armageddon for young America' – was disastrously wrong: the attack on Pearl Harbour took place just a few days later.[38](#)

## **Mackenzie King**

[William Lyon Mackenzie King](#), a long-serving Canadian prime minister before and after World War II, was a convinced Spiritualist. In November 1947 he was in the UK to attend the wedding of Princess Elizabeth to Philip Mountbatten and used the opportunity to have a sitting with Geraldine Cummins.[39](#) In October 1948 he was in the UK again and had a second sitting. These sittings have been ably and critically (although not totally unsympathetically) analyzed by Ged Martin, a Canadian historian.[40](#) Martin argues that King was not the sophisticated judge of evidence that Cummins took him to be, and that names that impressed him in the scripts (Wilfred [Laurier], an earlier Canadian prime minister, and Mowat and Fielding, members of his cabinet) could have been well within the reach 'of an intelligent woman, interested in public affairs, blessed with a retentive memory and matured during the high summer of Edwardian Empire'.

Roosevelt himself was said to have communicated, stressing the importance of King staying in office in order to provide leadership for both North America and the International Community. This first session was held at 25 Jubilee Place; following the second, at London's Dorchester Hotel in October 1948, Gibbes and Cummins had to be smuggled out of the hotel to avoid waiting journalists. 'Roosevelt' appeared again later, warning of future trouble in Asia.

King was also impressed by communications appearing to come from JJ Donnelly, a resident of Owen Sound who had recently died. However, Donnelly's obituary had appeared in *The Times* two days before. Again, a critical assessment must balance the judgements of medium and sitter at the time with those of a historian reviewing the case many years later.

## Doctor Connell

'Doctor Connell' was a pseudonym for Cummins's brother Robert, a psychologist with a keen interest in the possibly psychic origins of mental disorders. Together, sister and brother authored two books of case histories proposing that racial heritage was an additional factor to consider when diagnosing a patient.<sup>41</sup> Their argument was that deep distress suffered by an individual's ancestors could lodge in his or her subconscious and give rise to otherwise inexplicable medical issues – what might today be described as an epigenetic condition. It was asserted that Cummins, if furnished with an object belonging to the patient, could, through automatic writing, access this damaging racial inheritance and effect a cure, and further, that these diagnoses enabled a cure to be achieved in most cases – a claim that, however, cannot be independently evaluated because of the anonymity of those concerned.

## Raynor Johnson

Raynor Johnson, Master of Queen's College, Melbourne, and a writer on spiritual and religious topics, met Cummins on a visit to England in October 1953, and was impressed by her. Shortly after his return he received from her a script of a sitting that contained statements ostensibly made by his deceased mentor [Ambrose Pratt](#), an Australian writer. Johnson had given her no information about Pratt, not even his name. Johnson received some twenty such scripts from 'Pratt', and they made a deep impression on him – the central personal experience that convinced him of survival.<sup>42</sup> They appeared to contain information that Cummins could not have discovered by research, along with abundant evidence of Pratt's remarkable personality and interests.

The scripts laid on Johnson an obligation: a mission from the FWH Myers group, of which Pratt had now seemingly become a part, to write a non-technical book on Douglas Fawcett's philosophy of Imaginism. It was stated that Fawcett's view of the continually evolving creative imagination of the 'Source' or 'Godhead' was much closer to the nature of reality than a sterile and static Idealism.<sup>43</sup>

Pratt was quite well-known as a political figure, journalist and writer of potboiler novels; he also wrote on Malayan magic, the Orient and flora and fauna. It is not inconceivable that Cummins picked up some biographical and personal characteristics about him from her general reading over the years.<sup>44</sup> In addition, Cummins freely admitted to having prior knowledge of the life and work of Douglas Fawcett.<sup>45</sup>

## *Swan on a Black Sea*

In August 1957, [WH Salter](#), a senior official of the Society for Psychical Research, wrote to Cummins: 'A member of the S.P.R. who lost his mother some months ago, would like to give her an opportunity of sending him a message.'<sup>46</sup> This referred to Henry Coombe-Tennant and his mother Winifred, who had died in 1956. Both individuals' identities were unknown to Cummins. The eventual result was the production of over forty automatic scripts by Cummins purporting to originate with



the deceased Winifred Coombe-Tennant. They give a lifelike description of her personality and interests and cover key events in her life, including her political activism, her relationships with her children, mediumistic research in which she was pseudonymously involved with the SPR (as the medium 'Mrs Willett'). Published as *Swan on a Black Sea* (1965), they are among the most highly-regarded in the research canon, their credibility further enhanced by a long introduction by [CD Broad](#), a distinguished professor of philosophy at Trinity College, Cambridge).[47](#)

An objective assessment requires answers to at least four key questions. Does the content reflect, in detail, the life experiences of Coombe-Tennant? Is it expressed in language characteristic of her highly individual personality? How much could Cummins have gleaned from published sources, or her own quite wide circle of middle and upper-class social acquaintances, which her rich and retentive subconscious might have convincingly worked up? Finally, who is best qualified to judge on these matters?[48](#)

On the positive side, the material reads well: it has pace, character and vitality, and contains much accurate and convincing information. There is abundant biographical detail, expressed in ways characteristic of Coombe-Tennant in life. Roy, [Montague Keen](#) and [David Fontana](#),[49](#) all experienced researchers, were impressed by the number of factual statements that turned out to be accurate;[50](#) Roy claims this effectively negates any explanation in terms of coincidence. With some reservations her surviving sons Alexander and Henry testified to the scripts' accuracy and the flavour they give of their mother's personality.[51](#)

On the other hand, a certain amount of of the information given (though by no means all) was in the public domain. Also, given the circles in which Cummins moved, there were several individuals through whom, at least in theory, she could have gained knowledge of facts later stated in the scripts. They include Oliver Lodge, [Edith Lyttelton](#),[52](#) an active SPR member, and Frederic Myers's widow Eveleen, Coombe-Tennant's sister-in-law who wanted her to live with her and become her 'medium'. Private details about the relationship between Eveleen and her husband and their son Leopold, who committed suicide in 1944, appeared in the material.[53](#) She could also have gained a certain amount of the information about Arthur and Gerald Balfour, who are frequently referred to in the scripts, from her friend Edith Somerville.[54](#)

There is in fact no direct evidence that any of these or other people were in fact the source of such details. Cummins herself, as she did generally, carefully examined the matter,[55](#) disclosing that she met Oliver Lodge twice, in 1932 and 1933, and Dame Edith Lyttelton twice in 1938, and that she also gave Lyttelton two sittings and one for Gerald Balfour and his wife in 1939. She denied that she got any information from Myers's wife Eveleen, or that she had ever met Coombe-Tennant, further stating she had only read a fraction of Balfour's paper on 'Mrs Willett', none of which contained much of the material she produced in her scripts.[56](#) There is no reason to disbelieve her. Lodge wrote of her 'transparent honesty'[57](#) and there was never any serious question of a lack of good faith on her part.

One might consider Coombe-Tennant's immediate relatives, Alexander and Henry, best placed to judge the authenticity of the material. But this is not certain: Henry denied that his mother would ever use the term 'West Kensington' to describe the London district now officially known by that name, when in fact it appears in the *Journal of the Society for Psychical Research* and was probably quite common.<sup>58</sup> However, this misjudgement by Henry was the exception rather than the rule.

Evidence in favour of the scripts' authenticity can now also be found in Coombe-Tennant's diaries, which were published in 2011 and show a large number of similarities and cross-references.<sup>59</sup>

## Assessment

The nearest anyone came to impugning Cummins's honesty was [ER Dodds](#), a classical scholar and experienced psychical researcher who knew her personally. He imputed a skill in fishing and an occasional tendency to exaggerate in order to provide comfort.<sup>60</sup> This comment gains extra force from the fact that much of her automatic writing was for women whom she admired and with whom she had a close friendship, notably Miss Gibbes and Edith Somerville, whose biography Cummins wrote.<sup>61</sup> However, it is hard to see these two characteristics proving a full, adequate explanation for her most celebrated cases.

More significant is the 'Fawcett' material (see above), suggestive of a highly retentive subconscious memory leading to cryptomnesia (source amnesia), or which, combined with a flair for literary dramatization, might create the illusion of genuine discarnate communication. It may be relevant that her plays and fiction have been better received than some writers on her have appreciated, indicating a greater talent for creative writing than she modestly acknowledged herself.<sup>62</sup> In addition, it is clear that she was a wide if eclectic reader and had a broader social circle than the psychical research community was fully aware of.<sup>63</sup> These could well be the ingredients from which some apparently convincing narrative detail in her scripts was assembled.

That does not explain a capacity to access highly specific information and capture the unique flavour of a personality she had never met. As stated above, in some of these cases one must express caution, particularly those linked to her close companion EB Gibbes and the Gibbes/Messel milieu. However, much impressive material exists beyond this. She was not a professional medium and there was no hint of fraud attached to her or her work. She knew a number of other mediums, but there is no evidence that she was involved in a fraudulent network that shared information, of the kind described by M Lamar Keene in *Psychic Mafia*.<sup>64</sup>

The above points are worth elaborating. Cummins often stressed that she shared the scientific approach and mentality of her brothers and sisters and that she had a dual role, both as medium and also as 'experimental psychologist', involving, as far as possible, an objective approach to her own productions as well as those of others. She stated that she had no Spiritualistic missionary zeal in this field and no personal desire for survival.<sup>65</sup> She believed initially that her writings were the product of her subconscious, but eventually came to accept the survival hypothesis on the basis of the evidence they contained. With regard to the subject matter of

*Swan on a Black Sea*, she was by no means uninformed about the SPR's mediumistic research, with which the scripts partly deal – for example, in her book describing her own research on survival she included a whole chapter on the cross-correspondences<sup>66</sup> – but many of the intimate details about Coombe-Tennant's life that the scripts contain appeared to be beyond her normal knowledge and experience.

For her part, Gibbes argued vigorously that the controls were independent personalities and not dissociated aspects of Cummins's mind. It might be construed that 'Silenio', the meek Christian, represented the outwardly modest front that Cummins presented to the world, while 'Astor', the pagan with a critical and slightly imperious style, represented the more forceful individual that Cummins would like to have been – but Gibbes would have none of this.<sup>67</sup>

The examples that perhaps most complicate a survival interpretation are the Fawcett materials, which indicated an amazing capacity for high-level cryptomnesia, and Astor's prediction that there would be no war in 1939, which suggest wish fulfilment of the living. It is perhaps unreasonable to expect mediumship to be an exact science and one must balance these oddities against the impressive material generated in other cases. However, because some of this work was produced for people who knew her well there will always be an element of doubt with regard to the leakage of information and the accuracy of verification – less with regard to factual material almost certainly beyond Cummins's knowledge, but more so with regard to character and personality.

As some of her sitters and communicators were well-known, details not available at the time can in some circumstances now be checked. For example, a script that purported to originate with the mountaineer George Mallory, who died while climbing Mount Everest in 1924, described the extreme thinness of the air close to the summit and the short fall to his death,<sup>68</sup> and these details were confirmed in a more detailed account of the expedition published much later.<sup>69</sup> But much of this sort of thing is inferential, broadly within the scope of an active terrestrial intelligence.

One may also question to what extent Cummins might have been motivated by the need to earn a living and whether this led to an ingenious creative fabrication. She was the only one her siblings to lack professional income or salary, and after Gibbes's death was obliged to take in lodgers to make ends meet. She was obviously concerned about income from her books. But there is no evidence that she tried to exploit and maximize her gifts for financial reasons. She was not a professional medium or a Spiritualist giving regular public demonstrations. Rosamund Lehmann called her 'this dedicated, utterly selfless explorer, shrewdest, most humorous and delightful of human beings', a fitting note on which to end this survey of her life and work.<sup>70</sup>

Trevor Hamilton

## Literature

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## Endnotes

### Footnotes

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- [64.](#) Keene (1976), 27-30.



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