

# Alexis Didier

Alexis Didier (1826-1886) was a French clairvoyant whose extraordinarily accurate readings, carried out while he was in a hypnotic trance, attracted widespread notice during the mid-nineteenth century. Didier's ability was tested with favourable results by the stage magician Jean-Eugene Robert-Houdin.

## Life and Career

Alexis Didier was born on 30 March 1826 in Paris, one of ten siblings.<sup>[1]</sup> His father was a shoe mender. Although intelligent, his family could not afford to educate him, and instead he became an apprentice. Aged fourteen, he successfully undertook a mesmerist cure for epilepsy, at which time he was discovered to possess striking clairvoyant ability while in an entranced state. Some two years later he formed a partnership with Jean Marcillet, a former army officer who arranged for him to give private demonstrations. Word of his feats quickly spread throughout Europe, especially in Britain, where he made several visits.

In 1844, Marcillet and Didier were introduced to John Elliotson, a professor of medicine at University College, London, and the leading practitioner of hypnotism in Britain at the time. A successful initial sitting arranged by Elliotson led to positive press publicity and was followed by more successful demonstrations over two months. In 1847 Didier gave demonstrations for the French royal family and was also tested by the stage magician Jean-Eugene Robert-Houdin.

Didier's health deteriorated and he gave up giving demonstrations after the age of thirty. He died in 1886.

## Adolphe Didier

Didier's brother Adolphe also gave demonstrations in clairvoyance but during his subsequent career focused mainly on using the trance process for healing, as described in his 1877 book *Curative Mesmerism: Animal Magnetism and its Healing Power*.

## Sources

Detailed contemporary accounts of sittings with Didier, published in the *Zoist* of 1845 and 1852, can be read [here](#) and [here](#).<sup>[2]</sup> A full French-language account of Didier and his activities, including commentary, is given by philosopher Bertrand Méheust in his 2003 book *Un Voyant Prodigieux. Alexis Didier (1826-1886)*. Other sources are given in 'Literature'.

## Background

The idea of a 'magnetic fluid', a natural energy that could be manipulated by a skilled practitioner for healing, was promoted by the German doctor [Anton Mesmer](#) in the late eighteenth century.

Subsequently it was found that an individual who had been 'magnetized', in the resulting 'somnambulist' (sleepwalking) or trance state, might in rare cases demonstrate a psychic ability. The Animal Magnetism movement became hugely influential in France in the early nineteenth century, but the unusual phenomena associated with it caused intense controversy in the medical profession, and in 1842 the study of it was formally banned by the French Academy of Medicine. Mesmerists, as practitioners were now often called, turned instead to giving demonstrations of what entranced individuals, or 'somnambulists', could achieve.<sup>[3]</sup>

At this time, the idea of a fluid acting as a natural force was being gradually replaced by the modern concept of hypnosis working by a psychological process of mental suggestion, which was being popularized in Britain by John Elliotson, James Esdaile and James Braid, for anaesthetic and other medical uses.<sup>[4]</sup>

## Clairvoyant Abilities

According to published reports, Didier, while entranced and blindfolded, could read texts or words enclosed in boxes, sealed envelopes, or on concealed scraps of paper. Also in this condition he could win at a card game by clairvoyantly seeing the cards held by his opponent as well as cards dealt to him face down.

Without a blindfold Didier could read a sentence in a book taken randomly from a library shelf, on the (unopened) page specified by the sitter. He could describe the interior of the sitter's house, and read the title of a book that had been left on a table there. By handling an object, he was able to identify by name the person with whom it was linked, along with other details. He was also said to be able to diagnose health issues.

## Townshend Sitting

A detailed example of a sitting is given by the Rev Chauncey Hare Townshend, an English poet who himself practised mesmerism.<sup>[5]</sup> Marcillet brought Didier to Townshend's hotel, and left the pair alone. Townshend first sent Didier into a trance, then requested that he describe his house. Didier correctly stated that Townshend had two homes, one in London and one 'in the country' (in fact, near Lausanne in Switzerland). Viewing the Swiss property first, Didier gave an accurate representation of the exterior, including the small house to the side and the lake in front. He then described the paintings in the main living room, correctly stating that all were modern except for a seascape, also a religious painting which he went on to describe in close detail, as Townshend relates:

"There are three figures in the picture: an old man, a woman, and a child. Can the woman be the Virgin?" (he asked of himself musingly). "No! she is too old" (proceeded he, answering his own question, while I remained perfectly silent). "The woman has a book upon her lap, and the child points with its finger to something in the book! There is a distaff in the corner."

In fact, Townshend said, the picture represented St. Ann teaching the Virgin to read, and every detail described by Didier was correct.

Asked to say what the picture was painted on, Didier said it was neither canvas nor copper, but some other 'curious substance'.

After some consideration he began to rap on the table with his knuckles, as if trying to ascertain the nature of the substance. Then he called out "C'est sur pierre." (The picture is in fact on black marble.) "Now," said he, "I am looking at it behind. It is of a curious colour entre noiretre et gris (the exact colour it is behind). It is also rough behind. Et tiens" added he, "c'est bombe [dome-shaped]." This last peculiarity would have convinced the most incredulous. The picture, from a warp or curve in the stone, had been very difficult to frame.

Didier went on to describe an ornate mirror in which he could 'see' paintings reflected, among them one of a horse lying down and a man with a wheelbarrow.

Townshend said that Didier went on to give an equally detailed description of his house in Norfolk Street, London, describing the maid-servants there, the horse in the stables, and other details. He also identified the writer of a letter in a sealed envelope, correctly stating how long Townshend had known her and in what connection; he went on to describe the lady's sister, and wrote down the full name of her father.

Townshend then tested Didier's power of reading unseen text.

I brought out of the next room Lamartine's Jocelyn, which I had bought that day, I opened it, and Alexis read some lines with closed eyes. (...) Then, suddenly, he said: "How many pages further down would you wish me to read?". I said "eight". I had heard of this faculty, but never witnessed it. He then traced with his fingers slowly along the page that was opened, and read: "a dévoré d'un trait toute ma sympathie". I counted down eight pages from the page I had first opened, and found, exactly where his fingers had traced, the line he had read. It was correct, with the exception of a single word. He had read "déchiré" instead of "dévoré". Human incredibility began to stir in me, and I really thought perhaps Alexis knew Jocelyn by heart.

## Edwin Lee

Experiments with Didier were conducted in Brighton and Hastings in 1849 by Dr Edwin Lee who had previously written about animal magnetism and homeopathy.<sup>[6]</sup> Lee published a detailed account of thirteen sittings in his 1866 book *Animal Magnetism and Magnetic Lucid Somnambulism*. He noted that Didier preferred to write down his sensations and communications rather than speaking them, which he took to indicate a preference for automatic writing.<sup>[7]</sup>

## Robert-Houdin

Tests of Didier by the celebrated conjuror [Jean-Eugene Robert-Houdin](#) were made in at the request of the Marquis de Mirville, author of books on spiritualism. De Mirville, who was present at the encounter, subsequently published a verbatim account, including letters written to him by Robert-Houdin.<sup>[8]</sup>

De Mirville began by establishing Robert-Houdin's views on so-called clairvoyants. The conjuror stated he had only seen performances by two individuals, and found them both 'contemptible'. (Demonstration of 'second sight' was a feature of his own stage act, in which an object produced by a member of the audience and touched by him was described exactly by his blindfolded son.)<sup>[9]</sup>

They then went to Marcillet's apartment, where Didier was giving a sitting to several people. After a brief interruption, Didier was again put into a trance state by Marcillet. Robert-Houdin blindfolded him, covering his face with cotton wool and 'two enormous handkerchieves', so that 'from the top of the forehead to below the lips did not allow of the very tiniest opening'. He then took out two new packs of cards, intending to play *Ecarté*, a casino game at which Didier was said to excel but whose performance Robert-Houdin believed he could match by trickery. Having removed the wrapping he shuffled the cards and asked Didier to cut them. He dealt five cards to Didier, laying them face down in front of him, and five cards to himself, again laying them face down. He was about to pick up his cards to begin the game, but Didier said he could already identify all ten of the cards, which he proceeded to do correctly. In two further repetitions Didier identified concealed cards held by Robert-Houdin with the 'same accuracy and infallibility'.

Robert-Houdin removed the blindfold. Taking a book from his pocket, he opened it randomly and asked Didier to read from the page eight pages on. Didier indicated a point on the open page, about two thirds down, where he said the words 'Après cette triste cérémonie' would be found on the eighth further page. Robert-Houdin found exactly these words, although not on the eighth page further on, but the one after that.

Robert-Houdin then gave Didier a letter and asked him to describe the writer, which he did more or less accurately, also the writer's address, which he was able to write down exactly after five minutes reflection. Asked what this person was doing, Didier unexpectedly replied that he was in the act of betraying Robert-Houdin's confidence, which the conjuror did not for one moment believe, but which he later stated proved to be the case (the friend was stealing a large sum of money from him).

Didier then made accurate statements with regard to Robert-Houdin's wife, who was present. He failed to identify the nature of a cardboard item in Robert-Houdin's pocket, wrongly naming it as a business card, but accurately described a folded piece of paper next to it as 'Receipt of MM. Saquier and Bray, booksellers, 64, Rue des Saints-Peres, for 15 francs, 20 cents'.

In a final test, Robert-Houdin handed Didier a lock of hair, which Didier correctly identified as belonging to his teenage son. Robert-Houdin wanted to know if Didier could identify his son's illness. Didier could find nothing wrong, then settled on a speck in the boy's eye, which had been giving his father much anxiety but which Didier assured him would soon clear up.

Discussing aspects of the case with de Mirville immediately afterwards, Robert-Houdin pointed out that his own card-guessing feats were achieved by the use of cards that were variously marked, of unequal sizes, and arranged in particular ways,

along with 'signals and telegraphs' – none of which was available to Didier. He also insisted on the 'absolute impossibility' of Didier being able to see anything through the blindfold.

The following day he gave de Mirville the following signed statement:

While I am by no means inclined to accept the compliments which Mirville is kind enough to pay me, and while I am particularly anxious that my signature should not be held to prejudice in any way my opinion, either for or against magnetism [hypnotism], still I cannot refrain from affirming that the incidents recorded above are ABSOLUTELY CORRECT, and that the more I think about them the more impossible I find it to class them with those which form the subject of my profession, and of my performances.

May 4th, 1847. ROBERT HOUDIN

Some two weeks later de Mirville received another letter describing a second test that Robert-Houdin had carried out independently with Didier, which the conjuror stated was 'even more extraordinary than the first, and has left me without a shadow of doubt as to the clairvoyance of Alexis'. Robert-Houdin wrote:

This time I took much greater precautions than at the first seance; for distrusting myself I took with me a friend, whose natural imperturbability enabled him to form a cool judgment and helped to steady mine. I append an account of what took place, and you will see that trickery could never have produced such results as those which I am about to recount. ...

[Didier] told me the cards that I had to play, though my cards were hidden under the table and held close together in my hands. To each lead of mine he played one of his own cards without turning it up, and it was always the right card to have played against mine. I left this séance then in the greatest possible state of amazement, and convinced of the utter impossibility of chance or conjuring having been responsible for such marvellous results. Yours, etc.,

(Signed) ROBERT HOUDIN.

16 May, 1847.

## Alexandre Dumas

In September 1847, four months after Robert-Houdin's tests, Didier gave a demonstration to guests of [Alexandre Dumas](#), the celebrated writer of *The Three Musketeers* and *The Count of Monte Cristo*.<sup>[10]</sup> Dumas took a keen interest in account of psychic phenomena related to mesmerism, and had just published the second instalment of a new novel *Joseph Balsamo*, in which the topic features prominently, although until this time he had never actually seen a demonstration. Dumas described the session in a letter dated the same day and published in a French magazine. A second letter described a second session held a week later. In one incident, Didier

was then handed a book from a pile on the table, which he opened at page 229, asking what page he should read from. Somebody said "249", whereupon he picked up a pencil and drew a line across and about two-thirds down page 229, explaining that he was going to read at the same level. Still blindfolded, he read "We will not dwell on the insuperable transport difficulties", which were the exact words two-thirds down page 249. "He had seen through eleven pages," Dumas comments.

One of the guests was the chaplain of Saint-Cyr military academy. Didier identified him as a priest (he was wearing ordinary clothes), who worked in a large building occupied mainly by young men wearing uniforms buttoned up to the neck, then stated he was the chaplain of a military college. Asked to name it, Didier said he would be able to, as the the name was on the buttons, and 'after staring intently at a point on the wall', declared 'Saint-Cyr College'.

In this session, certain details described by Didier corresponded to Dumas's thoughts, suggesting a telepathic element to the process.

## Controversy

An account of experiments with Didier was published in 1844 by J Forbes, a doctor, in the British medical journal *Lancet*. Forbes found reasons for doubting the apparent successes he observed. For instance, he claimed that Didier, having correctly identified the contents of a box had had a 'perfect opportunity' to open it unobserved, even though, as Marcillet responded, he was at the time being closely watched by Forbes and several other people, who did not see him do so. He further insinuated that Didier was being surreptitiously aided by people present who were sympathetic to him.

Reasons for doubt were enumerated by [Frank Podmore](#), a founding investigator of the [Society for Psychical Research](#), who in his later years adopted the role of resident sceptic.<sup>[1]</sup> Podmore dismissed the blindfolding of Didier as 'unsatisfactory' (although the description he cited was even more rigorous than that done by Robert-Houdin, who considered two handkerchiefs sufficient instead of the three usually used). In support of this assertion, he cited a letter in a newspaper written by an individual who claimed he had been blindfolded in the same way by a friend and 'managed to read distinctly'. Podmore does not state how he thought Didier managed to name cards that were concealed from his view.

Podmore further argued that Didier had pecuniary motives for cheating, since he received five guineas for each sitting, and suggested that Marcillet might have acted as his confederate. He proposed that Didier ran an extensive intelligence operation, gathering details on individuals whom he might be expected to encounter in sittings (for instance Townshend, a noted authority on hypnotism). However, Podmore accepted that this explanation became more difficult to accept as it had to be applied to an ever-expanding circle, and as it implied 'the possession of highly-trained confederates and singular good fortune in the chance of sitters'.<sup>[2]</sup>

Eric Dingwall, a later SPR investigator, devoted a substantial section of his 1967 book *Abnormal Hypnotic Phenomena* to the Didier brothers, calling them ‘certainly two of the most puzzling and remarkable somnambules of the nineteenth century’.<sup>[13]</sup> He lamented that no properly controlled scientific tests had been carried out that were comparable in quality to those attempted by the earlier French Commissions, commenting that the conditions in such experiments that were undertaken precluded any systematic work.<sup>[14]</sup>

However, Dingwall contested Podmore’s claim that Alexis Didier might have somehow learned of the nature of tests beforehand,<sup>[15]</sup> arguing that considerably more evidence would be required to support claims of fraud. He concluded that the evidence for the paranormal acquisition of information ‘seems to me to be very strong’.<sup>[16]</sup>

Robert-Houdin’s biographer Michel Seldow, challenging the conjuror’s account of his tests of Didier, suggested that he did not mean what he said but did not wish to cross de Mirville, an aristocrat, or to expose a poor struggling colleague.<sup>[17]</sup> Seldow also claimed that Didier’s correct answers were lucky guesses, that most of his statements were in fact wrong and that anything apparently inexplicable was due to trickery – all of which is hard to reconcile with Robert-Houdin’s own statements, as Méheust points out.<sup>[18]</sup>

Melvyn Willin and Robert McLuhan

## Literature

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## Endnotes

### Footnotes

- 1.^ Biographical details in this section are taken from Meheust (n.d.).
- 2.^ Elliotson (1845).
- 3.^ Meheust (n.d.).
- 4.^ CHMC. (n.d.).
- 5.^ Townshend (1852). Also cited in Podmore (1898), 56-58.
- 6.^ Lee (1838).
- 7.^ Lee (1866).
- 8.^ De Mirville (1855), 19-32; also in Wallace (1899), from which these details are taken.
- 9.^ [Jean-Eugène Robert-Houdin](#). *Wikipedia*.
- 10.^ Details taken from Playfair (2008).
- 11.^ Podmore (1899), 53-58.
- 12.^ Podmore (1899), 58.
- 13.^ Dingwall (1967), 206.
- 14.^ Dingwall (1967), 164.
- 15.^ Dingwall (1967), 174.
- 16.^ Dingwall (1967), 205.
- 17.^ Barrington (2004).
- 18.^ Méheust (2003).