

Drop-In Communicators

Most personalities that communicate through mediums identify themselves as someone known to the sitter. But occasionally some appear that are unknown to anyone present, and give details of themselves that are later found to match those of a deceased person. Such cases can only with extreme difficulty be explained in terms of psi among the living, and are therefore seen as strong evidence by advocates of survival.



Definition

The term 'drop-in communicator' was coined by parapsychologist and reincarnation researcher [Jan Stevenson](#), who defines it as follows:

One who purports to be a deceased person completely unknown to everyone at the séances, where he manifests. He must be a total stranger, both to the medium and all the sitters. They must not only not have known the communicator when he was living, but must also never have known anything about him.^[1]

Reports of drop-ins are found in the early parapsychological literature,^[2] but for the most part their significance was not recognized, as they were published as isolated cases.^[3]

Eileen Garrett and the R101 Disaster

The first well-documented drop-in case followed the crash in northern France of the dirigible airship [R101](#), which burst into flames and went down in the early hours of 5 October, 1930. Of its 54 passengers and crew, 48 were killed including its captain, Lieutenant Herbert Carmichael Irwin.

Two days later, a sitting with trance medium [Eileen J. Garrett](#) took place in London, organized by paranormal researcher [Harry Price](#). Its aim was to try to establish contact with the discarnate spirit of the famed author and Spiritualist [Arthur Conan Doyle](#), who had died three months earlier. However, the first communicator to speak through the entranced medium was identified as 'Irving or Irwin' and appeared strongly motivated to give a true account of the crash of R101. His statements, delivered with extreme urgency, included a number of specialist terms, for instance:

Useful lift too small. Gross lift computed badly – inform control panel. And this idea of new elevators totally mad. Elevator jammed. Oil pipe plugged. This exorbitant scheme of carbon and hydrogen is entirely and absolutely wrong...

Explosion caused by friction in electric storm. Flying too low altitude and could never rise. Disposable lift could not be utilized. Load too great for long flight...

Fabric all water-logged and ship's nose is down. Impossible to rise. Cannot trim. You will understand that I *had* to tell you ... Two hours tried to rise but elevator jammed. Almost scraped the roofs at Achy...^[4]

The communication was taken down almost verbatim in its entirety by the sitting's stenographer. In a subsequent investigation by Price, the transcript was reviewed by the R101's supply officer, who had not been on the fatal flight. He found that the description by 'Irwin' broadly corresponded to the known facts and likely circumstances of the crash.

Price's view, widely shared by other commentators then and later, was that Garrett lacked the technical expertise to create a realistic account of this nature, either by fraud or by some unconscious process. Nor could she have known about Achy, an obscure French hamlet. These claims have been contested by sceptics on the grounds that there had been much publicity about the R101 prior to the flight, and that Achy was on the route she regularly took from Calais to Paris. However, these ideas in turn have been challenged by other investigators, who accept the paranormality of the case without necessarily endorsing it as evidence of survival.

Alan Gauld's Cases

In 1971, psi researcher [Alan Gauld](#) published a detailed paper on drop-in communicators who appeared in mediumistic sittings held by an English group in Cambridgeshire.^[5] The sittings were organized by a member of the [Society for Psychical Research](#) whom Gauld refers to as 'LG', and his wife, 'WG'. From 1937 to 1943 the group used a Ouija board and later sat in a darkened room in order to obtain physical phenomena. It was intermittently active until 1964 and most of the records, which included dates and attendee lists as well as the communications, were preserved.^[6] Gauld viewed the records and interviewed the principal sitters several times each for their recollections of the alleged communicators.

In 470 sittings, some 240 alleged communicators appeared, at least 37 of whom were apparent drop-ins. Of these, thirteen did not give sufficient details about themselves for their identities to be verified. However, fifteen provided enough for Gauld to match each one to a deceased individual, and a further ten he was able to verify in part.

Descriptions of a selection of the communicators follows. Note that Gauld used pseudonyms in respect for the communicators' living relatives.

Duncan Stevens

'Duncan Stevens' communicated at about forty sittings between 1942 and 1950. He first identified himself on 14 July 1942, at which time he also brought news of the husband of a sitter, who had been killed in 1941 on a training flight. Over time, he further revealed:

- He had lived on Hinckley Road in Nottingham.
- He had been a curate at Frinton Parish Church, then became a RAF pilot.
- His full name was Reverend Duncan Stevens.
- He had died in a plane crash into water in a Blenheim aircraft at age 28, about 10 months prior to the sitting.
- His favourite composer was Brahms.
- He had interest in 'many religious orders'.

The first three statements were verified by the sitters from clerical records. Gauld visited Stevens's sister, who verified the other details except the favourite composer. No normal means for the sitters to have received all this information was found.

Edward Druce

This communicator first appeared on 4 September 1942. He revealed only that his surname was Druce, that he had died some time before, and that he had lived on Hartington Drive. He also referred to 'Grantchester Rive Xmas,' and 'university laboratory or library'. LG found a Mrs Druce living on Hartington Drive in Cambridge, and learned that her husband Edward had been a laboratory worker who had drowned himself in the River Granta at Christmas some years previously. His death had been described in newspaper accounts at the time, but Gauld noted that none of the sitters were regular readers, and that the drowning had occurred before the group first met for sittings.

Robert Fletcher

This communicator first appeared on 28 September 1942. He disclosed that:

- His name was Robert Fletcher.
- He had died two years before on a ship that had been torpedoed, of which he had been a crew member.
- His parents and brother John were still alive.
- He had lived in Tenterden.
- His birthday was 8 July and his age (given at a sitting in 1943) was 21.

Between a newspaper account and a journal account circulated in Tenterden, all these details were confirmed by Fletcher's associates, except the birthday which was actually 3 July and so could be classed as a near miss. Tenterden is in Kent, south-east of London and hence far from Cambridge, but Gauld noted that WG had grown up nearby and had a relative there. On the other hand, she had left fifteen years prior and the relative did not send her newspaper articles.

Gustav Adolf Biedermann

At his first appearance on 4 January 1943, this communicator was belligerent, railing against religion. However, the group exercised forbearance and on two subsequent appearances his demeanour changed to friendly and forthcoming. Facts about him were confirmed by Gauld, who recalled having read writings by a psychologist of the same name. Biedermann's correct statements were:

- He had lived in London.
- His house had been Charnwood Lodge.
- He was of German birth, having moved to England in 1887.
- His full name was Gustav Adolf Biedermann.
- He was a rationalist.
- He was past the age of seventy when he died about a year prior to the sitting.
- He had his own business.
- He was associated with the London University (having worked in the psychology department of University College).

It was also noted by Sir Cyril Burt, who had been friends with Biedermann, that he had a 'blunt, arrogant, obstinate and aggressive manner' but became a 'pleasant companion' once one got past the façade. He also had a penchant for denouncing religion.

Walter Leggatt

This communicator first appeared on 10 May 1943, and while at first somewhat confused, said at a later sitting that his memory had improved. Over three sittings, he revealed the following facts, which were verified by Gauld:

- His full name was Walter Leggatt.
- He had been a sergeant in the RAF.
- He had worked as a rates clerk for the town of Acton (name of town changed).

With so few details, Gauld did not consider this case to be a strong one.

Josephine Street

This communicator, who appeared on 17 May 1943, was clearly motivated to contact her husband in order to reassure him that she was still with him. She identified him as Archie Street, and said they had lived on Lauriston Road in Cambridge. LG was able to contact Archie Street, an administrator at a Cambridge college, and invited him to the next sitting, at which Josephine produced a loving message for him and their daughter. Street's skepticism was fuelled when the daughter's name was given incorrectly. However, he was impressed when Josephine's second name, Eugenia, was given. The records for further sittings were lost. Gauld calls the case 'rather unsatisfactory', as a death notice giving all these details had been published a few days previously.

Max Cheyne

On 28 June 1943, a 'control' communicator acting as intermediary mentioned a 'Max' who had been in the RAF, lived in 'Ditton Park' and whose surname 'has some connection with cables or chains'. He wished to send his love to his 'wife and

babe'. In a second sitting the intermediary said the name was 'Cheynes' and the plural might be wrong. The sitters were unable to verify his existence. However, Gauld discovered that Max Langdon Cheyne, who had lived in Ditton Fields, Cambridge and had been in the RAF, had been killed in October 1942, leaving behind a wife and young daughter.

Kate Clarke

On 20 September 1943, a communicator named Kathleen offered her services as a 'helper'. She said that her full name was Kathleen Clarke and everyone called her Kate, that she had been the eldest of eleven children, was British and had lived in Poplar, and that she had died in childbirth at the age of seventeen during the war when George V was king, meaning World War I.

Gauld found records of several Kathleen and Kate Clarkes who died in their teens during World War I. Only one had died in childbirth, but not in Poplar, and she was nineteen, not seventeen. Gauld also traced the birth records of seven other children in the family. He concluded that the correspondences were too many to attribute to chance, and if a link to Poplar could be found the case would become a strong one; however, he had not succeeded at the time of this writing.

Harry Stockbridge

This 'very lively' communicator appeared at ten sittings, giving numerous details about himself:

- His surname was Stockbridge (WG received a vivid mental image of a pair of stocks and then a bridge).
- His first name was Harry.
- He was tall, dark, thin and had large brown eyes.
- He was a second lieutenant with the Northumberland Fusiliers, and also mentioned 'Scottish Tyneside'.
- He had died 14 July 1916.
- He had 'hung out' in Leicester.
- He knew Powis Street (the name of which had come spontaneously to both LG and WG) well.

The sitters' single attempt to verify his identity failed but Gauld did better, finding a Second Lieutenant H Stockbridge of the Scottish Tyneside battalion of the Northumberland Fusiliers who had been killed in action on 14 July 1916. His birth certificate showed he had been born in Leicester. A relative confirmed that Stockbridge had been tall, dark and thin, and Gauld confirmed from a photograph that he had large dark eyes. He also learned that there was a Powis Street close to where Stockbridge was born. His death had been mentioned in some publications and on a memorial, but Gauld determined that it was highly unlikely any of the sitters would have seen these.

Gauld concluded that the records of the sittings contained much inaccurate information but also many correct details which could not have been acquired by normal means. He noted that the information as a whole revealed no suspicious

pattern, such as coming mostly from a single source; that in some cases it was known only to communicators' relatives whom Gauld contacted later; and that in two cases the communicators did not reproduce errors found in written records, but instead corrected them.

Robert Marie

In introducing a paper^[7] on this case, Stevenson notes two unusual features: the discarnate personality had lived far from locations familiar to the medium or witnesses, and he also mentioned events that happened after his death.

Stevenson first learned of the case in 1963 from a businessman in St Etienne, France, Jacques Brossy. Brossy attended four Ouija-board sessions with medium Mme B Bricout in Paris in 1932-33, following which he was able to verify details mentioned by a communicating personality who identified himself as Robert Marie. Stevenson read and copied all sitting transcripts and verification correspondence, interviewed both Brossy and Bricout, and independently verified the statements through historical records and interviews with people who had known Marie.

The communicator indicated that:

- He had been killed in World War I.
- His beloved wife, with whom he had had a small child, had remarried.
- His name was Robert Mary (a variant of 'Marie', both common in Normandy).
- He was born on the coast in Villers-sur-Mer.
- His son was left deaf and dumb from meningitis, but was not retarded.
- His son, also named Robert, was raised by his grandparents during the war.
- The younger Robert was dead at the time of the sittings.
- His parents lived at a villa where they looked after the gardens.
- Robert himself was a gardener.
- He preferred not to speak of his wife, as he felt both antagonism toward her and disappointment in love.

Brossy learned in 1933 that one Auguste Charles Robert Julien Marie had lived in Villers-sur-Mer and was killed in the war in 1914. He had married and had a child named Robert who had eventually become deaf-mute due to meningitis. His father was a retired customs official who had begun taking care of a villa (thus his son likely helped in the garden).

Stevenson also found errors:

- Auguste Charles Robert Julien Marie was born in Colleville-Montgomery, not Villers-sur-Mer, though he had lived virtually all his life there, so may have thought he had been born there.
- Associates knew him as Charles, not Robert.
- According to informants in and close to the Marie family, August Charles Robert Julien Marie was not the father of the boy Robert (who, Stevenson found, lived only to age seven or eight, and was indeed raised by his grandparents); the actual father was Robert's brother Louis Ferdinand.

Stevenson could not be certain whether the communicator was Auguste Charles Robert Julien Marie or Louis Ferdinand Marie (who had been born in Villers-sur-Mer). However, the amount of correct and disparately-sourced information in the sitting that could apply to either brother, combined with errors that would be unlikely in a fraudulent case, convinced him that fraud, cryptomnesia and telepathy were all less likely than genuine communications from the surviving spirits of either one or both of the brothers.

Runolfur Runolfsson

This case emerged via the reputable Icelandic medium [Hafsteinn Björnsson](#). The unknown communicator did not ‘drop out’ after one or a few sittings, as is usual in such cases, but instead developed a long-standing relationship with Hafsteinn. The case developed over numerous sittings during the years 1937-38 and was described in a 1946 book by Icelandic author Elinborg Larusdottir.^[8] Haraldsson and Stevenson published a paper on it in 1975.^[9]

The communicator intruded into the sitting, refusing to give his name. He asked brusquely for snuff, coffee and rum, and persistently demanded ‘I am looking for my leg, where is my leg?’. The sitters began to lose patience, causing him eventually to yield to their request for information about himself:

- His full formal name was Runolfur Runolfsson.
- He had lived with his wife at Kolga/Klappakot, near Sandgerdi.
- He had been very tall.
- He was 52 when he died, in October 1879.
- He died after attempting to walk home from a visit in Keflavit during very bad weather while severely inebriated; after lying down by the shore to drink more, he fell asleep and was carried away by the tide and drowned.
- His body was not found until 1880, by which time it had been torn to pieces by dogs and ravens.
- The remains were buried in Utskalar graveyard, except for a missing thigh bone.
- The bone washed up again at Sandgerdi, where it was passed around, and was now somewhere in the house of a man attending the sitting, Ludvik Gudmundsson.
- The sitters would be able to verify the accuracy of his words by checking the church book of Utskalar Church.

Doing so, they found a record with the correct name, date of death and age of death. Ludvik Gudmundsson consulted with elderly men of Sangerdi, and learned that a thigh bone had been placed between the inner and outer walls of his house when it had been renovated by a previous owner. After some searching, the bone was found, and discovered to be unusually long, matching the communicator’s claimed stature. It was buried in traditional Icelandic fashion, and at the next sitting, Runolfur said he had been present at the rite and reception afterwards and gave some veridical details, including the types of cakes served. Further investigations by Larusdottir using the Utskalar parish records and a cleric’s diary

revealed that Runolfur had lived in Kolga/Klappakot, and had died and been dismembered as the communicator had described.

These verifications were double-checked by Erlendur Haraldsson and Ian Stevenson working together on the case in the early 1970s. They interviewed 23 witnesses and examined records, from which they were able to establish that neither Hafsteinn nor other sitters had gained access to these records or known anyone in the area prior to the sittings. They noted also that the communicator's behaviour and manner during the sittings closely matched the known personality traits of the living Runolfur.

The spirit continued to communicate through Hafsteinn, eventually becoming the medium's main control and acting as go-between for other discarnates. The case is described in a short documentary by Keith Parsons which may be seen [here](#).

Gudni Magnusson

A second drop-in case included in the same book by Elinborg Larusdottir and then investigated by Haraldsson and Stevenson^[10] is that of Gudni Magnusson. Hafsteinn Bjornsson conducted a séance in Reykjavik on 25 January 1941, in which a drop-in communicator seemed to intrude. He gave his name both as Gudmundur and Gudni Magnusson and said his death was related to his vehicle in Eskifjordur. No notes were taken at the time; however on 26 February a sitter related the information in a letter to a friend. This and other recollections by sitters revealed:

- Hafsteinn's control said a man was with her who was between twenty and thirty years old, of average height, with blond hair that was thinning at the top of his head.
- His name was Gudni Magnusson.
- He and his death were connected with the locations Eskifjordur and Reydarfjordur.
- He had been a car or truck driver.
- He had been under his vehicle to repair it, and had stretched when something inside him ruptured.
- He died while being taken to medical care by boat.

In June, two other sitters confirmed that these recollections were correct, and added more:

- Gudni had living parents.
- He had managed to get home before being taken by boat to the doctor.
- He had died four or five months prior to the sitting.

These details were eventually found to closely match the life and death of Gudni Magnusson, a truck driver living in Eskifjordur, who had died the previous fall. His truck, which had not been running well, ran out of gasoline on a mountain pass between Eskifjordur and Reydarfjordur forcing Gudni to walk eight miles to fetch a refill. He returned home exhausted, then during the night suffered extreme stomach pain, which doctors later diagnosed as caused by an internal rupture or obstruction. He was rushed by motorboat to hospital but died on the way.

Haraldsson and Stevenson, investigating in the early 1970s, received further confirmation of the communicator's description of himself from his brother and sister. The death certificate gave cause of death as intestinal perforation and peritonitis, possibly aggravated by an intestinal weakness resulting from a childhood operation. The birth and death certificates revealed his age at death as 24. It was not possible to confirm the communicator's statement that he had been trying to repair his vehicle when the rupture occurred, but the fact that it had been running badly at the time made that a plausible conjecture. The investigators also ascertained that neither medium nor sitters had connections with Gudni, his home locale being in a remote part of the country.

A weakness of this case is that the statements about the sitting were based not on notes recorded at the time but on recollections some weeks and months later. In the investigators' view, this is somewhat mitigated by the fact that the 26 February letter recorded some of the key facts before any attempt was made to verify them. A newspaper had published an obituary of Gudni the previous November, but it did not contain some of the key details revealed at the sitting.

KM Wehrstein

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Endnotes

Footnotes

1. ^ Stevenson (1975).
2. ^ For example: Moses, WS. (11 December 1874, 10 March 1875, 1879); Hill (1917); Gibbes (1937); Tyrrell (1939); and Zorab (1940).
3. ^ Haraldsson & Stevenson (1975).
4. ^ Price (1933), 120-21.
5. ^ Gauld (1971).
6. ^ See Gauld (1971), Table I, 281.
7. ^ Stevenson (1973).
8. ^ Larusdottir (1946).
9. ^ Haraldsson & Stevenson (1975a).
10. ^ Haraldsson & Stevenson (1975b).