

# 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 Ian Stevenson, who defines it as

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.<sup>[1]</sup>

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

## Eileen Garrett and the R101 Disaster

The first well-documented case followed the crash in northern France of the dirigible airship R101, which burst into flames in the early hours of October 5, 1930. Forty-eight of its 54 passengers and crew were killed, including its captain, Flight Lieutenant Irwin.

On October 7, a sitting with the trance medium Eileen Garrett took place in London, organized by the paranormal researcher Harry Price. The aimed was to try to establish contact with the discarnate spirit of 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. 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...

A stenographer was present, enabling the communication to be taken down almost verbatim in its entirety. In a subsequent investigation by Price the script was reviewed by the R101’s supply officer (not involved in the flight), who found that the description by ‘Irwin’ broadly corresponded to the known facts and likely circumstances.

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, a small and obscure 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.<sup>[4]</sup> 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 they used a Ouija board, later using a darkened room in order to obtain physical phenomena.. The group was active, on and off, until 1964. Records with dates and attendee lists as well as the communications were kept, though some were lost.<sup>[5]</sup> Gauld viewed the surviving records and interviewed the principal sitters several times each, noting their recollections of the alleged communicators.

In 470 sittings of which records survive, 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 did give sufficient details for Gauld to match to a deceased individual; a further ten gave statements about themselves that he was able at least partly to verify.

Some cases, of varying degrees of evidentiality, are summarized here (Gauld used pseudonyms for the sake of the living relatives).

## **Duncan Stevens**

'Duncan Stevens' communicated at about 40 sittings between 1942 and 1950. He first identified himself on July 14, 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 September 4, 1942, He revealed only that his surname was Druce, that he had died some time before, and that he 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 these events occurred before the group first met to hold sittings.

## **Robert Fletcher**

'Robert Fletcher' first appeared on September 28, 1942. He disclosed that

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

Between a newspaper account and a journal account, both circulated in Tenterden, all these details were confirmed, except the birthday which was actually July 3 and so could be classed as a near miss. Tenterden is in Kent, south-east of London and 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**

This communicator was belligerent at his first appearance on January 4, 1943, railing against religion. However, the group was patient with him, and on two subsequent appearances he was 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
- Gustav Adolf Biedermann was his full name

- he was a rationalist
- he was past 70 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 was a 'pleasant companion' once one got past the façade. He also liked to denounce religion.

### **Walter Leggatt**

This communicator first appeared on May 10, 1943, and while at first confused somewhat, said his memory had improved during a later sitting. 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 appeared on May 17, 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 sent him 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 June 28, 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 September 20, 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 during the war when George V was king (World War I), in childbirth at the age of seventeen.

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 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 July 14, 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 made a single attempt to verify his identity, which failed. Gauld did better, however, finding a Second Lieutenant H Stockbridge of the Scottish Tyneside battalion of the Northumberland Fusiliers who had been killed in action on July 14, 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 concludes that the material contained much inaccurate information, but also many correct details which he doubts could have been acquired by normal means. He notes that the information as a whole revealed no pattern, such as coming mostly from a single source; that in some cases it was known only to relatives that 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<sup>[6]</sup> on this case, Ian 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 on receiving a letter from a businessman in St Etienne, France, named Jacques Brossy. Brossy worked with a medium, Mme B Bricout, and the case concerned four Ouija-board sittings that took place in Paris in 1932-33, following which he had been able to verify details mentioned by a communicating personality who identified himself as Robert Marie. Stevenson read and copied all the séance notes as well as verification correspondence, interviewed both Brossy and Bricout, and independently verified the statements by interviewing people associated with Marie and by searching historic records.

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 war 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 with the garden), and he had a brother, Louis Ferdinand, who also was killed in the war.

Stevenson also came across certain 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 Louis Ferdinand

Stevenson could not be certain whether the communicator was Auguste Charles Robert Julien Marie, or Louis Ferdinand Marie (who actually had been born in Villers-sur-Mer). However, the amount of correct and disparately-sourced information in the séance 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 concerned Hafsteinn Bjornsson, a reputable Icelandic medium. Unusually, 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.<sup>[7]</sup> Haraldsson and Stevenson published their paper on it in 1975.<sup>[8]</sup>

The communicator intruded into the sitting but refused to give his name. He stated, 'I am looking for my leg, where is my leg?', and kept repeating this. He also asked brusquely for snuff, coffee and rum. The sitters began to lose patience, and he eventually yielded to their request for information about himself, as follows:

- his full 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 while attempting when drunk to walk home from a visit in Keflavit during very bad weather: he lay down by the shore to drink more, fell asleep and was carried away by the tide
- his body was not found until 1880, by which time it had been torn to pieces by dogs and ravens
- the body was 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 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

They did so, and found a record under the name with the correct date 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 very long, matching the communicator's claimed stature. It was buried in traditional Icelandic fashion, and at the next séance, Runki (a diminutive of Runolfur) said he had been present at the rite and reception afterwards and gave some veridical details, including names of the cakes served. Further investigations by Larusdottir using the Utskalar parish records and a cleric's diary revealed that Runki had lived in Kolga/Klappakot, and had died and been dismembered precisely 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 personality traits of the living Runki.

Runki continued to communicate through Hafsteinn, eventually becoming the medium's main control, acting as go-between for other discarnates.

## Gudni Magnusson

A second drop-in case included in the same book by Elinborg Larusdottir and then investigated and published by Haraldsson and Stevenson<sup>[9]</sup> is that of Gudni Magnusson. Hafsteinn Bjornsson conducted a séance in Reykjavik on January 25, 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, a month later on February 26, a sitter described it in a letter to a friend. A further statement of the incident was made on March 30 as part of a verification process, as follows:

- Hafsteinn's control said a man was with her who was between 20 and 30 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 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. The circumstances were as follows. The truck had not been running well and ran out of gasoline on a mountain pass between Eskifjordur and Reydarfjordur. Gudni was obliged to walk a total of eight miles for a refill, returning home exhausted. During the night he suffered extreme stomach pain, which doctors later diagnosed as 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. Dates on the birth and death certificates revealed his age at death to have been 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, Eskifjordur 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 by the sitters some weeks and months later. In the investigators' view, this is somewhat mitigated by the fact that the February 26 letter recorded some of the key facts before any attempt was made to verify them. Also, a newspaper had published an obituary of Gudni the previous November, although it did not contain some of the key details communicated at the sitting.

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## Literature

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## References

### Footnotes

- 1.^ Stevenson, I (1975) Letter to the Editor, *Journal of the Society for Psychical Research* 48: 764, p 123.
- 2.^ They cite: Moses, WS. Correspondence. *The Spiritualist*, December 11, 1874 and March 10, 1875; Moses, WS (1879). *Spirit Identity*. London: WH Harrison; Hill, JA (1917). *Psychical Investigations*. New York: Doran; Gibbes, EB (1937). Have We Indisputable Evidence for Survival? *Journal of the American Society for Psychical Research* 31, pp 65-79; Tyrrell, GNM (1939). A Communicator Introduced in Automatic Script. *Journal of the Society for Psychical Research* 31, pp 91-5; and Zorab, G (1940). A Case for Survival? *Journal of the Society for Psychical Research* 31, pp 142-52.
- 3.^ Haraldsson & Stevenson (1975), p 33.
- 4.^ Gauld (1971).
- 5.^ See Gauld (1971), Table I on p 281.
- 6.^ Stevenson (1973).
- 7.^ See Larusdottir, E (1946). *Midillin Hafsteinn Bjornsson [The Medium Hafsteinn Bjornsson]*. Iceland: Nordri.
- 8.^ Haraldsson & Stevenson (1975a).
- 9.^ Haraldsson & Stevenson (1975b).