

EE Fournier d'Albe

Edmund Edward Fournier d'Albe (1868-1933) was an Irish physicist and inventor, remembered chiefly for his investigation of the Goligher mediumistic circle.

Life and Career

A descendant of French Calvinists, Fournier d'Albe was born on 25 October 1868 in Bloomsbury, London. His initial education was at the Royal Gymnasium of Düsseldorf. In 1891 he received a BSc degree in inorganic chemistry and physics at the Royal College of Science, London. He moved with his family to Dublin in 1895, where he later served as assistant to George F Fitzgerald at Trinity College.

From 1893 to 1905 he worked as a science reporter. In 1899 he taught mathematics at University College, Dublin, and from 1910 to 1914 was professor and lecturer of physics at the Universities of Birmingham and the Punjab, Lahore. During those years he wrote popular scientific textbooks and translations of monographs on psychical research and astronomical themes. In 1923 he published a biography of [William Crookes](#) and in 1924 a short treatise about selenium, the 'moon-element' which was thought to be a conductor of electricity when illuminated.

In 1912 he invented and patented the optophone, a handheld scanner which converted printed characters into tones as a means to help the sightless read (a [precursor of optical character recognition](#)). In May 1923 he demonstrated image telephony, transmitting the first wireless picture broadcast from London. In the following year he showed experiments with the acoustic spectroscope to an audience at the Royal Society. These works, along with proposed improvements for television, earned him a fellowship at the Institute of Physics, a membership to the Royal Irish Academy (MRIA), and the vice-presidency of the Radio Association.

Fournier d'Albe joined the Celtic revival movement during the late 1890s, and in 1903 wrote an English-Irish dictionary and a phrasebook. He advocated [Esperanto](#) as an alternative to English for the Celts and lectured (1926) in that language on wireless telegraphy and television in Edinburgh.

At this time he suffered a stroke that forced him to retire from professional activities. He died in St Albans, Hertfordshire, on 29 June 1933.^{[1](#)}

Psychical Research

Between 1906 and 1910 Fournier d'Albe worked as assistant to [William Barrett](#) in the physics laboratory at the Royal College of Science, Dublin. From 1908 he was an associate member of the [SPR](#) assisting [Oliver Lodge](#); he also acted as honorary secretary of the Council of the SPR Dublin Section,^{[2](#)} presenting it with a modified *planchette* for testing automatic writing in mediums.^{[3](#)}

Fournier d'Albe was interested in the physical phenomena of the séance room, notably the researches of materialisation mediums carried out by William Crookes.

He advanced ideas of post-mortem survival in two books, *Two New Worlds* (1907) and *New Light on Immortality* (1908).⁴ He conceived of the afterlife in physical terms, using the analogy of the atom with its electrons and the solar system: an 'Infra-World' where an electron is equivalent to the Earth, visible only at an 'almost inconceivably small scale', and a Supra-World visible at a huge scale.⁵ He saw the human individual as a permanent, hierarchical organization of an infinite number of 'living entities', some of which play a determining role in life processes and which, after bodily death, become detached as 'psychomeres', or 'soul-particles'. These constitute the 'soul-body', which contains a person's memories and is more plastic than the physical body, therefore being capable of 'a more exalted and vivid type of existence'. Its normal shape 'somewhat resembles a flame', but it may assume any shape desired and, 'under exceptional conditions, reconstruct for itself a physical body'.⁶

In his opinion 'mind is everything, and matter but an expression of the universal mind'.⁷ He wrote:

No universe exists which is entirely unconnected with this of ours. We know that the fruit of our slightest act goes thundering down the ages, that ... everything is of infinite ... consequence. And if it leaves a permanent mark on the material universe, it will affect, also, all invisible universes. This reflection may give a new zest to our present form of existence. To pierce into the innermost recesses of nature ... to make life happy ... for ourselves and our kind, to assert our supremacy over disease and death, to conquer and rule the universe ... such is our task here and now.⁸

Criticism

Frederick Stratton reviewed *New Light on Immortality* for the *Journal of the Society for Psychical Research*. He found that the author's speculations 'make very interesting reading', but also that they were poorly evidenced and might wrongly be taken as statements of scientific fact by an unwary reader.⁹

Goligher Circle

Fournier d'Albe is remembered mainly for his report of an investigation of the Goligher mediumistic circle in Belfast in 1921, following the death by suicide of William Crawford, the circle's principal investigator. Crawford had been impressed by the temporary appearance of ectoplasmic structures seeming to emanate from the body of the medium; Fournier d'Albe himself had made a detailed study of William Crookes' investigations of the materialisation medium Florence Cook, and in 1920 was a member of a SPR investigation committee of the French materialization medium Marthe Beraud ('Eva C').¹⁰ However, he remained unconvinced by the Golighers and concluded that the phenomena had been faked.¹¹ (See Goligher Circle for full details)

Works

Selected Books and Articles

Fournier d'Albe, E.E. (1906). *The Electron Theory: A Popular Introduction to the New Theory of Electricity and Magnetism*. London: New York, Bombay, Longmans, Green, and Co.

Fournier d'Albe, E.E. (1908). Bridging the gulf. *The Annals of Psychical Science* 6, 89-98.

Fournier d'Albe, E.E. (1924). *The Moon-Element. An Introduction to the Wonders of Selenium*. New York: D. Appleton and Company.

Selected Translations

Von Schrenck Notzing, A. (1920). *Phenomena of Materialization. A Contribution to the Investigation of Mediumistic Teleplastics*. London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner & Co.

Flammarion, C. (1923). *Dreams of an Astronomer*. New York: D. Appleton and Company.

Nordmann, C. (1923). *The Kingdom of the Heavens. Some Star Secrets*. London: T. Fisher Unwin Ltd.

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Literature

Fournier d'Albe, E.E. (1907) [Two New Worlds](#). London, New York: Longmans, Green, and Co.

Fournier d'Albe, E.E. (1908). [New Light on Immortality](#). London, New York: Longmans, Green, and Co.

Fournier d'Albe, E.E. (1922). [The Goligher Circle \(May to August 1921\)](#). London: John M. Watkins.

Fournier d'Albe, E.E. (1923). [The Life of Sir William Crookes, O. J., F.R.S.](#) London: T. F. Unwin.

GAS/APT. (1933). Obituary. *Nature*, July 22, 125-126.

Lunney, L. (2009). Fournier d'Albe, Edmund Edward. In [Dictionary of Irish Biography](#). [Web page]

Noakes, R. (2019). *Physics and Psychics. The Occult and the sciences in modern Britain*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

SPR Dublin Section. (1909). Report. *Journal of the Society for Psychical Research* 14, 63-64.

Stratton, F.J.M. (1909). Review of *New Light on Immortality*. *Journal of the Society for Psychical Research* 14, 78-79.

Unsigned. (1909-10). Report of the Council for 1908. *Journal of the Society for Psychical Research* 14, 36-40.

Endnotes

Footnotes

- [1.](#) All biographical data come from Lunney (2019) and GAS/ATP (1909).
- [2.](#) Unsigned (1909-1910), 40.
- [3.](#) SPR Dublin Section (1909), 64.
- [4.](#) Fournier d'Albe (1907), 147.
- [5.](#) Fournier d'Albe (1907), 28.
- [6.](#) Fournier d'Albe (1908), 205-206.
- [7.](#) Fournier d'Albe (1907), 152.
- [8.](#) Fournier d'Albe (1907), 154.
- [9.](#) Stratton, FJM. (1909). See also Noakes (2019).
- [10.](#) Fournier d'Albe (1923), 176.
- [11.](#) Fournier d'Albe (1922), 47-48.