

Goligher Circle

The Goligher Circle was a Northern Irish Spiritualist group said to produce striking psychokinetic phenomena. William Crawford, a Belfast engineering lecturer, carried out experiments in sittings between 1916 and 1920 and published three books about his findings. In 1920 Crawford took his own life (for unrelated reasons). A further investigation in 1921 led to allegations of fraud, which in turn have been contested.

Goligher Family

The Golighers were a working-class Belfast family whose members worked mainly in the textile industry.^[1] [William Crawford](#) represents them as honest and devout, regular attendees at their local Spiritualist church. Around 1912 they began sitting once a week for physical phenomena, hoping to establish direct communication with deceased spirits. They quickly obtained rapping communications, and eventually came to produce what Crawford called 'powerful and well regulated' phenomena.^[2]

The group consisted of Mr Goligher, his three daughters, son and son-in-law. By a process of elimination, the youngest daughter, Kathleen (born June 27, 1898), was found to be the main source of the mediumistic power, which it was assumed she had inherited from her mother (who, however, did not take part). Crawford, defending her from attacks by sceptics, states that she is 'an upright and honourable young woman, has received no monetary recompense for what she has done, and has always been willing to give me her services freely in the cause of science'.^[3]

More details about Kathleen and her family can be found [here](#).

Sittings and Phenomena

The group met mainly in the attic of the family home, which was set aside for the purpose (Crawford states he obtained similar results with the group in his own home and elsewhere).^[4] In the attic, each person sat on a wooden chair on a bare floor, the only other items in the room being a table and some mantelpiece ornaments, except when Crawford brought apparatus. A gas lantern with red glass was used for illumination. Sittings began with hymns and a prayer, and raps typically started after a few minutes, with phenomena increasing to their fullest within fifteen minutes. The family sat in a circle, holding hands. At no time, Crawford says, was there contact between any part of the bodies or clothing of the family members and material items being moved psychically.

Crawford described two classes of phenomena: sounds and movements. The sounds were

- raps of all degrees of loudness, from the slightest taps to sledge-hammer blows
- combinations of raps, such as single knocks, double knocks, treble knocks (two fast, one slow), volleys, imitations of tunes and dances
- specialties, such as the imitation of a bouncing ball, a match being struck, a man walking, a horse trotting, the leg of the table being sawn, the floor being rubbed with sandpaper

The most common movement was the levitation of the table; it also rotated and performed other movements. In a typical sequence, a visitor was invited to push the levitating table to the floor but find himself unable to; next he would be invited to sit on it and be tipped off; then he would be pushed out of the circle by the table pressing forcefully against his body (see below, Testimonies).

In other regular occurrences, a metal trumpet waved in the air, a small handbell was taken up and

rung, and sitters sometimes felt themselves being physically touched.^[5]

Crawford also described the appearance of 'whitish, translucent, nebulous matter' emanating from the body of the medium, which seemed to him to be closely similar or identical with the materialization phenomena obtained with other mediums. He believed that this substance was what made physical phenomena possible, but also that it was mixed with another component 'which appears to be invisible, impalpable, and generally speaking, outside the range of physical things altogether.'^[6]

Investigation and Experiments

The 'operators', as Crawford called the communicating entities, communicated with raps by using a code of three raps for 'yes', one for 'no' and two for 'doubtful'. Verbal messages were received by means of a sitter slowly speaking the alphabet until a rap sounded on a letter.

Trying to find the reaction to the levitation of the table, Crawford discovered that Kathleen's weight increased slightly by predictable amounts, with any movement of the table in any direction. There was no reaction in the air around or under the table, but a weigh scale under the table read a higher weight than the dead weight of the table on partial levitation, and about the same on full levitation. He concluded that both a vertical and horizontal force were being exerted on the table, though they were truly components of a single force, and the reaction increased with height off the floor.

He also discovered that each sitter lost a few ounces of weight during a sitting. In the case of Kathleen, it was an uneven process: she repeatedly quickly lost, then slowly and partially regained weight throughout.

Instruments revealed an apparent line of force between Kathleen and the table, starting shortly before levitation. Crawford said it felt like 'a clammy, cold, almost oily sensation—in fact an indescribable sensation, as though the air there were mixed with particles of dead and disagreeable matter. Perhaps the best word to describe the feeling is "reptilian".'^[7]

Experimenting with raps, Crawford concluded that these were created by psychic 'rods' which extended from Kathleen's body and were formed by threads of the whitish substance multiplying and expanding. He theorized that it was molecular in nature, drawn from the bodies of the medium and the sitters. Similarly, he explained the mechanics of the levitation by hypothesizing that a 'psychic structure' in the form of a cantilever beam extended from the medium downward to a few inches above the floor beneath the table. Crawford's later books elaborate on these discoveries, adding details.

The third book, *The Psychic Structures at the Goligher Circle* (1921) includes many photographs and illustrations, including impressions supposedly made on clay by rods, and the substance emitted from Kathleen body. Here, Crawford speculated that if the 'rods' interacted with a material substance and then dematerialized, returning into the medium's body, particles of that substance would be found at the point of re-entry. To test this, he bound Kathleen's ankles tightly with whipcord to the back rail of her chair and placed a dish of soft clay under the table. Following this, he reported, considerable amounts of clay were found on her shoes and stockings and on the whipcord.^[8]

Testimonies

Whately Smith

[Whately Smith](#) (aka Carington), a member of the [Society for Psychical Research](#), attended a sitting in

December 1916 and reported his experiences in a 1919 review of Crawford's *The Reality of Psychic Phenomena*.

First came a variety of raps of all kinds from scarcely audible taps to real "sledge-hammer" blows which shook the whole floor. These latter could not normally have been produced without the aid of some heavy percussive instrument or violent kicks with the heel of a boot.

The members of the circle were holding hands and all hands were clearly visible to me. I am sure that no one present could have made sufficiently violent movements with their feet without attracting my attention.

When the raps ceased the large metal trumpet already mentioned moved into the circle sliding along the ground apparently under its own power, so to speak, the sitters next to it (Miss Kathleen Goligher and Mr. Goligher) raising their hands to allow it to pass. It then fell on the floor under the table, and after a few moments' scuffling about it was separated into its two component parts. These two parts then rose into the air and projected towards me from under the table, being at this juncture not more than 18 inches from me.

I was invited to take hold of these two parts and I accordingly grasped each in turn.

I found, in each case, that I could move the end which I held to and fro in any direction with the greatest ease, although I was conscious of a slight elastic resistance. But when I tried to twist either of them about a longitudinal axis I was quite unable to do so. So great was the resistance to torque that I can only describe it by saying that it felt as if the lower ends of the two parts were embedded in a large mass of solid concrete, freely suspended so as to allow of transverse and longitudinal movement, but so heavy as to preclude twisting.

After a few moments these two parts of the trumpet fell to the ground, and shortly after the table began to move about.

This table was about 2 feet long and 1½ feet broad and was made of dark painted or stained wood. It had four legs of the ordinary turned variety, which had no cross-bars between them, and weighed about ten pounds.

First it moved to and fro over a range of about a foot. Then it was rotated about a vertical axis at the rate of about 15-20 revolutions per minute. At the request of Dr. Crawford the direction of rotation was reversed without delay and apparently without difficulty. This rotation was distinctly jerky rather than smooth, and on the whole I should say that this irregularity was due rather to the intermittent nature of the rotating impulses than to inequalities of friction against the floor.

The table then moved again slightly, to adjust itself apparently, gave one or two tilts, and finally rose clear off the floor to a height of at least 12 inches.

In the course of the evening it did this some six or more separate times. On each occasion I bent down and looked clear under the table. I was particularly well situated for this observation, since, as already explained, the gas stove used for warming the room was diagonally opposite me and emitted a reddish glow from the heated metal, as well as gleams of light from cracks or the like. It was easy, as the table swayed gently to and fro in the air, to bring each leg in turn in line with this glow – by moving my head slightly from side to side – and thus to satisfy myself that there was nothing in contact with any of the legs.

On two occasions when the table was clear off the ground all the members of the circle lifted their hands above their heads, in which position they were verified by me.

After two or three of these preliminary levitations I was invited to step inside the circle, and I accordingly did so. I grasped the table firmly with both hands and did my utmost to prevent it moving, but I was quite unsuccessful. By dint of great exertion I could prevent it from moving in any one direction and could keep it steady for a second or so, but it instantly moved in some other direction, the force changing with great rapidity. The amount of force exerted was quite extraordinary, indeed incredible to anyone who has not actually experienced it. I estimate that at times I exerted pressures of fully 100 lbs. weight. At one time the table was made so heavy that I could not lift it. At another time, when I had for a moment relaxed my grip, it levitated within six inches of me. While it was thus suspended in the air I again took hold of it and found that although I could move it, within limits, easily in any direction in the plane of its top, I encountered a remarkably solid resistance when I tried to push it downwards and towards the medium at an angle of about 45 degrees. So great was the resistance in this direction that it felt like pushing against a solid strut of wood or metal.

During the whole of this time I was standing within three feet of the medium and, most of the time, facing her. I could see distinctly the whole of her body down to the knees, and the light from the lamp fell directly on to her lap. Her feet were in shadow and I could not make them out distinctly. This is natural as she always sits with them tucked under her chair and her heels against its crossbar.

I could infallibly have detected any movement of the medium, and I can certify that she sat absolutely motionless during the whole time that the table was performing these violent evolutions.

I later sat on the table and, with my feet clear of the floor, was moved a distance of about six or eight inches. In addition, the table was three times tilted up to such an angle that I was unable to retain my seat.

Finally, after I had dismounted, it pushed me to the extreme edge of the circle, moving to a distance of fully four feet from the medium in the process. In this position I tried my hardest to push it back. Again it felt like pushing against a solid strut.

It is impossible to reconcile the idea of illusion, whether imposed or self-induced, with results recorded by mechanical apparatus.

Finally, speaking personally, I cannot believe that my own very vigorous “wrestle” with the table – a considerable exertion I may say – could have been an hallucination imposed and removed without my knowledge.^[9]

William Barrett

[William Barrett](#), an Irish physicist and cofounder of the Society for Psychical Research, attended a sitting in December 2015, together with ‘Dr W’, a medical practitioner, and published a brief report.

^[10] He states that the room was illuminated by red light.

Knocks soon came and answered questions. Three knocks for yes, two for doubtful, and one for no. Messages were also slowly spelt out by repeating the alphabet aloud, a knock coming at the right letter. The knocks appeared in some cases to come from the table, at others from outside the circle. Suddenly a very loud knock came in response to a request, and was repeated with violence. Dr. W. asked for it to be still louder, and a tremendous bang then came, which shook the room and resembled the blow of a sledge-hammer on an anvil. After the sitting we examined the feet of the sitters and all had felt slippers on, except one who had light shoes, and none

could have produced these sounds with their feet.

The trumpet below the table then began to move about, and the smaller end poked itself from under the top of the table towards Dr. W. and myself. We were allowed to try and catch it, but in spite of all our endeavours it eluded us, darting in and out and changing its position as we tried to seize it. The medium was on the opposite side of the table to us, and all the circle held up their hands so that we could see each linked hand clearly as the trumpet played hide and seek with us.

Then the table began to rise from the floor, until it reached a height of some twelve or eighteen inches, and remained thus suspended and quite level. We were allowed, first myself and then Dr. W., to go beneath the clasped hands of the sitters into the circle and try to force the table down. This both of us found it impossible to do; though we laid hold of the sides of the table it resisted our strongest efforts to push it down. I then sat on the table when it was about a foot off the floor and it swayed me about, finally tipping me off.

We then returned outside the circle, when the table turned itself upside down and moved up and down with the legs uppermost. Again we entered the circle, and tried to lift the table top from the floor; but it appeared to be rivetted, and were unable to stir it. When we resumed our place outside the circle, the table floated up and turned itself over again with its right side uppermost. During these experiments and whilst the table was levitated, all the sitters repeatedly held up their clasped hands, so that we could see no one had any contact with the table; they were in fact so far from it that we could walk between them and the table.^[11]

Others

Other testimonies are given in an appendix to Fournier d'Albe's report (see below).

Reviewing my many experiences with the circle, I cannot conceive how the phenomena witnessed by myself and Dr Crawford on those many occasions could have been the result of trickery or fraud. The light was such that suspicious movements of any member of the group would certainly have been observed.

As regards the levitation of the table, I have not the least hesitation in asserting with all the emphasis I can command that I have seen the table rise on many occasions, when any assistance given to it by any member of the Circle either by their hands or by their feet or by a cord stretched between them is quite out of the question.^[12]

The table was lifted into mid-air and I could not pull it down for the life of me. Again the table was fixed to the floor, a plain wooden floor with no carpet or linoleum upon it. On a signal being given (three knocks) I did my best to move it towards the medium, but without avail. I am a big strong man accustomed to moving heavy weights, and I could have pushed the table and all the folks sitting upon it (six in number) with the aid of my knees jammed in between the legs of the light table and my feet upon the floor. The boards were laid in the direction of the medium, making it easier. I examined the floor afterwards for obstructions, nothing was to be seen. I had been allowed to place the table upon the floor myself; always fair and square and above board.^[13]

Regarding the levitation of the table, I can solemnly assure you that not only did it leave the floor without contact, but remained in space, well over the heads of the sitters. I did not time the period it was suspended; I should estimate about two minutes. The table whilst suspended rocked from side to side, turned quite over several times, and when requested by Dr. C to alter its position, it did so. Dr. C then grasped the table whilst it was suspended, and demonstrated that this strength was insufficient to pull it down. The table then quietly descended to the floor.

I saw Kathleen, together with the chair in which she was sitting, raised about nine inches from the floor and carried, or I might say floated, about till the exact spot was located where the chair was desired to be placed.^[14]

There are many and varied manifestations while the members of the circle sit, hand-in-hand, each a distance of a foot or more from the nearest point of the square-topped table. The table itself now and then rises, and remain suspended, without any physical visible means of support, the several seconds or indeed a few minutes in the air; it turns right over in the air; it tilted an angle of 45°; it fastens itself to the floor, so that a strong man's pull cannot raise it from the floor, it raises itself notwithstanding that a fourteen-stone man sits on it, and tilts him off; all these and many more movements at the request of one of the circle. It indicates its willingness to undertake the doing of something requested, by the usual three taps, and with two if it is doubtful whether it can accomplish the given task; or with one if it cannot or will not attempt it.

All these and many more things I have seen at the Goligher Circle on several occasions; and I consider myself favoured by having been permitted to witness these phenomena and to have heard the 'sawing of the wood', the 'bouncing ball', the 'ringing bell' and all the rest, and to be able to say that all this took place in a room where there was a lighted gas jet surrounded with red glass, enabling everything to be seen – the relative positions of the sitters, the movements of the table, the bell, the trumpet – with three times the clearness, at least, with which one can see the objects in a photographic dark room.^[15]

Criticism and Controversy

Following the 1916 sitting described above, Whately Smith made a further visit in 2020, finding a 'conspicuous and startling deterioration' of the phenomena and concluding that the mediumship had become fraudulent.^[16]

EE Fournier d'Albe

On July 20 1920, Crawford took his life by cyanide poisoning,^[17] having made plain in a letter that this was due to a mental collapse and had nothing to do with his work with the Golighers (see [here](#)).^[18] Subsequently, his literary executor requested that EE Fournier d'Albe, an Irish science professor with an interest in materialization phenomena, carry out an independent investigation to confirm Crawford's findings.^[19] Fournier d'Albe attended twenty sittings between May and August of 1921. He decided to start with the conditions that Crawford had imposed and make them gradually more stringent in order to increase the evidentiality. However, this had the effect of inhibiting the phenomena. He noted that the sittings were often brought to a close abruptly due to some excuse, the 'operators' tended to insist on low or no light on the sitters' legs, and phenomena abruptly stopped when light was shone on them.

Fournier d'Albe noticed that when he asked to be touched, the touch felt like that of a human foot. Impressions produced in clay showed marks of stockings when Kathleen was wearing stockings, but these did not appear when she was asked to take them off. The 'ectoplasm' that appeared in photographs appeared to him to be indistinguishable from chiffon fabric.

He also claimed to have seen Kathleen 'levitating' a stool with her foot and to have felt muscular movement in her legs, and those of her father, that synchronized with movements of the table.

In the final sitting, when Kathleen's legs were tied and the other sitters were all requested to sit facing away from the centre of the circle, no phenomena at all occurred, not even the ubiquitous raps by which the 'operators' had apparently frequently communicated.

In the conclusion of his detailed report, Fournier d'Albe argued that the phenomena were faked, and that Crawford had worked 'in an atmosphere of complete confidence' with 'a habit of thought which became impervious even to fairly obvious evidences of artificiality.'^[20]

Responses to Fournier d'Albe

Fournier d'Albe is liberally cited by critics of parapsychology, who typically represent Crawford as an 'ingenuous and credulous enthusiast who was deceived by the Goligher family'.^[21] Some alleged that he killed himself because of anxiety about an impending loss of reputation, following a realization that he had been duped,^[22] despite Crawford's insistence in his suicide note that his depression had nothing to do with his researches, of which he remained proud.^[23]

More sympathetic commentators generally agree on the insufficiency of Crawford's reporting and precautions against fraud.^[24] He is criticized for insisting on working alone, when he might have consulted colleagues and stage conjurers to help guard against trickery, and for failing to place his work in the context of previous similar investigations and theories.^[25]

Fournier d'Albe's report has in turn been criticized for a lack of detail that makes his claims hard to evaluate. In a review, [Eric Dingwall](#), an experienced psychical researcher, pointed out that most of the claims were based on inferences – 'suspicious incidents and movements which *might* have a simple explanation'^[26] – rather than actual evidence. He wrote, 'If, as he says, there was good red light, then it is difficult to account for the fact that [Fournier d'Albe] did not *see* the medium performing these actions.'^[27]

Dingwall concluded:

Whether we may think it just or not, the fact remains that Dr. Fournier's book will be generally taken as a complete exposure of the circle and as a refutation of all Dr. Crawford's findings. Such a conclusion is warranted neither by the book itself nor by common sense. However unfortunate Dr. Crawford's conditions may have been he obtained results for which it is extremely difficult to account on any theory of fraud.^[28]

Dingwall also questioned the plausibility of a family of working people meeting regularly to perform tricks for four years without remuneration.^[29]

Michael Tynn notes that Crawford's observations of ectoplasm are consistent with those of other researchers, including [William Crookes](#), [Charles Richet](#) and [Oliver Lodge](#), that his weighing of the medium and sitters during levitation somewhat replicates that of Crookes with the medium [DD Home](#).^[30] [Michael Nahm](#) further notes that almost identical weighing experiments had been carried out with [Eusapia Palladino](#) by French researchers and these provided the same result: the medium's body weight increased by approximately the weight of the table when it levitated.^[31]

Later Sittings

Psychical researcher F McCarthy Stephenson, who had attended sittings before and after Crawford's death, and had been present at seven sittings with Fournier d'Albe, disagreed with his findings. Kathleen Goligher allowed Stephenson to perform further experiments, which he reported in 1936 (see photo in side panel).^[32]

More details about Kathleen Goligher and her family can be found [here](#).

KM Wehrstein

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Endnotes

Footnotes

1.^ Fournier d'Albe (1922), 6.

2.^ Crawford (1916), 4.

3. ^ Crawford (1916), 12.
4. ^ Crawford (1916), 4.
5. ^ Crawford (1916), 7.
6. ^ Crawford (2021), 22-23.
7. ^ Crawford (1916), 71.
8. ^ Crawford (1921), 73-93.
9. ^ Smith (1919), 315-18.
10. ^ Barrett (1919).
11. ^ Barrett (1919), 335-36.
12. ^ Fournier d'Albe (1922), 75.
13. ^ Fournier d'Albe (1922), 75.
14. ^ Fournier d'Albe (1922), 76-77.
15. ^ Fournier d'Albe (1922), 77.
16. ^ Salter (1946), 202.
17. ^ <https://ajwestauthor.com/who-was-william-jackson-crawford/>
18. ^ Gow (1921).
19. ^ Fournier d'Albe (1922), 6. All information in this section is drawn from this source except where otherwise noted.
20. ^ Fournier d'Albe (1922), 49.
21. ^ Nahm, 347; see for instance, Jastrow (1920a).
22. ^ Brandon (1983), 161; Jastrow (1920b).
23. ^ Gow (1921).
24. ^ Cited by Alvarado (2014), 354.
25. ^ Alvarado (2014), 352.
26. ^ Dingwall (1923), 21.
27. ^ Dingwall (1923), 22.
28. ^ Dingwall (1923), 24.
29. ^ Dingwall (1923), 23.
30. ^ Tymn (2013), 538.
31. ^ Nahm (2014), 348.
32. ^ Citations in Nahm (2014), 348.