

London Dialectical Society

The London Dialectical Society was a nineteenth-century rationalist debating club made up of prominent lawyers, doctors, scientists and other professionals. It is notable for its 1871 report of an investigation of spiritualism, which was carried out by a committee of largely sceptical members and which concluded by confirming certain claims of psychokinetic phenomena as genuine.

Foundation

The London Dialectical Society was founded in 1867 to 'afford a field for the philosophical consideration of all questions without reserve, but especially those comprised in the domain of ethics, metaphysics, and theology'.^[1] A wide variety of subjects was discussed at its meetings, including over-population, marriage and secularism.^[2] Its membership consisted of prominent professional people, such as [Charles Bradlaugh](#), a Liberal MP and noted atheist, the naturalist [Alfred Russell Wallace](#), HD Jencken, a barrister and fellow of the Royal Geographical Society, and [Charles Drysdale](#), a doctor and founding president of the [Malthusian League](#).

Report on Spiritualism

In 1869 the society embarked on an investigation of claims relating to spiritualist séance phenomena – unexplained rapping sounds, table levitations and the like – that were being widely reported at the time.^[3] It selected a committee of 33 members that included Bradlaugh (a sceptic), and Wallace, who was sympathetic to the claims, having himself reported observing such phenomena.^[4] [Thomas Huxley](#) and [George Henry Lewes](#) were both invited but declined to participate, the former stating that the subject did not interest him.^[5]

In its subsequent report, the committee stated that it had gathered testimonies from individuals who claimed to have witnessed psychical phenomena. Noting the 'high character and great intelligence' of these people, and the fact that their observations appeared to corroborate each other, it considered certain phenomena to be genuine, in particular, 'raps' emanating from furniture, floors and walls, and movements of heavy items of furniture – both apparently without cause and governed by an intelligence, which communicated by means of a simple code; together with other phenomena such as the appearance of lifelike hands and figures, and musical instruments playing themselves.^[6] The report further stated that 'the subject is worthy of more serious attention and careful investigation than it has hitherto received'.^[7]

The committee also divided into six sub-committees tasked with attempting to observe the phenomena directly by experiment. Two of these failed to observe anything worth recording and a third, which attempted to investigate the well-known spirit medium DD Home, recorded only weak phenomena. The other three reported observations of typical séance phenomena, notably subcommittee 1, whose methods and findings are described below.^[8]

Subcommittee 1

The report states that the members of subcommittee 1 established unanimously and conclusively

- that under certain bodily or mental conditions of one or more of the persons present, a force is exhibited sufficient to set in motion heavy substances, without the employment of any muscular force, without contact or material connection of any kind between such substances and the body of any person present.
- that this force can cause sounds to proceed, distinctly audible to all present, from solid substances not in contact with, nor having any visible or material connection with, the body of any person present, and which sounds are proved to proceed from such substances by the vibrations which are distinctly felt when they are touched.
- that this force is frequently directed by intelligence.^[9]

The report states that the group held a total of 40 sessions, in 34 of which anomalous sounds and/or movements of furniture were observed. The only people present were group members, with between three and twelve in attendance at a session, and typically around five to eight. It states that 'about four fifths' of its members were at the outset 'wholly sceptical', believing the claims to be the result of fraud, delusion or 'involuntary muscular action'.^[10] The report further states that, unlike the other sub-committees, the group did not use the services of a professional medium and instead relied on certain (unidentified) committee members whose presence was found to facilitate phenomena. These it describes as 'persons of good social position and of unimpeachable integrity, having no pecuniary object to serve, and nothing to gain by deception'.

The meetings were held in the homes of group members which were furnished in all cases with 'heavy dining tables requiring a strong effort to move them'.^[11] The rooms, tables and furniture were carefully examined before, during and after the experiments to ensure the absence of any concealed mechanical contrivance. The experiments were carried out in ordinary gas light.

The report eliminates fraud as an explanation, on the grounds that the movements of the tables

were in various directions, now to one side, then to the other; now up the room, now down the room - motions that would have required the co-operation of many hands or feet; and these, from the great size and weight of the tables, could not have been so used without the visible exercise of muscular force. Every hand and foot was plainly to be seen and could not have been moved without instant detection.^[12]

The report further states that delusion 'was out of the question', the table movements having been witnessed simultaneously by all present.

They were matters of measurement, and not of opinion or of fancy. And they occurred so often, under so many and such various conditions, with such safeguards against error or deception, and with such invariable results, as to

satisfy the members of your Sub-committee by whom the experiments were tried, wholly sceptical as most of them were when they entered upon the investigation, that there is a force capable of moving heavy bodies without material contact, and which force is in some unknown manner dependent upon the presence of human beings.^[13]

In one experiment, which the report describes as 'conclusive', table movements were found to continue when the company turned their chairs round, knelt on the chairs (so that their feet were visible and well away from the table) and held their hands four inches above its surface. The table continued to move when they placed their hands on the back of the chairs, and also when they moved the chairs twelve inches from the table and held their hands behind their backs, in which position the body was eighteen inches from the table and separated from it by the back of the chair. In these positions, the table was said to have moved 13 times and in different directions. The report states that this experiment was carried out in 'the full light of gas above the table', which at the conclusion was subjected to a careful examination.^[14]

Internal Controversy

The report contains dissenting statements by James Edmunds, the committee chairman, Henry Jeffery and Grattan Gear.

Edmunds objected that the framing of the report had 'practically drifted into the hands of devoted and zealous spiritualists'. He compared spiritualist claims to statements that are obviously false, and undeserving of belief, as for instance the claim that a man may transport himself to another city through the telegraph wire. He argued that little credence should be given to testimony 'that chairs will sometimes walk, and that tables will sometimes talk' simply because someone has said that he has seen these things.^[15] He went on to describe at some length his own experiences with mediums, describing incidents which he attributed to fraud, unconscious action or self-delusion.^[16]

Henry Jeffery denounced trance mediumship as 'ordinary hysterical affections', wilful imposition, 'outrageously incoherent and absurd'. He complained that the communications obtained during the investigation were 'frivolous or absurd', and, since they gave 'no information of any practical value, no new thoughts, no fresh expressions of worthy sentiment' could only be 'repugnant to minds of high religious and spiritual faculty'.^[17] He further said he considered spiritualists to be so eager as to be unreliable. However, he concluded: 'several of us have witnessed some remarkable phenomena which we have not been able to trace to imposture or delusion, and ... these, added to the gathered testimony of respectable witnesses, justify our recommendation of the subject to further cautious investigation.'^[18]

Grattan Geary complained that the commitment to obtain contrary evidence from sceptics had been disregarded, the investigation having been terminated prematurely. He noted that there did not seem to be anything supernatural or even unnatural about the movements, and nothing beyond the powers of human intelligence in any of the communications.^[19]

In responses given in editorial footnotes, the writer of the report denied that it was written by 'spiritualists', a term which could only apply to one of the five members of the editorial board and only six of the 33-member full committee.^[20] It was further stated that the lack of evidence about fraud was due, not to suppression by spiritualists, but the lack of participation from people knowledgeable about such matters.^[21]

In separate statements, Alfred Russel Wallace, [EW Cox](#) and Henry George Atkinson took issue with the sceptics' general claims.

Wallace challenged Edmunds's assertions that some things are too incredible to be confirmed by any amount of testimony and that spiritualist phenomena must follow definite laws like other phenomena. He also denied that confirmation depended on endorsement by investigating scientists, listing historical examples of scientists ridiculing claims that were later accepted as true.^[22]

Cox said he agreed with 'the opinion so well expressed' by Jeffery.^[23] He also agreed with Edmunds about the unreliability of second-hand testimonies, but argued this could not apply to the first-hand experimental work carried out by the subcommittees. He pointed out that Edmunds had not been a member of subcommittee 1, and had never attended the entirety of a meeting, or witnessed any of the experiments that were so persuasive to its members (likewise Geary had been present at only two meetings.) What Edmunds 'may have seen or failed to see elsewhere', Cox argued, had no bearing on the reality of the phenomena established by this committee in conditions that precluded fraud or delusion.^[24]

Going on to describe his own experience, Cox emphasized that he himself had started with the conviction that the phenomena could be explained in normal terms, but having observed them at first hand, was quickly persuaded that it was not delusion. He was also convinced by repeated tests that they were not fraudulently produced, while continuing to hold to the claim advanced by [Michael Faraday](#) of [unconscious muscular pressure](#). Finally, in experiments in which sounds and movements continued after all human contact had been clearly removed, he felt obliged to dispense with that also. He writes:

I was slowly compelled to the conviction that the existence of this Psychic Force was proved by evidence as conclusive as that which proves the existence of electricity, gravitation, light, heat, or any other of the Forces of nature. If Dr. Edmunds and Mr. Geary had taken the same pains, as did the other members of the Sub-committee, to inquire before forming an opinion, I am confident that, however reluctantly, they also would have been compelled to the same conclusion by the same evidence that forced unwilling conviction upon the scepticism of their colleagues.^[25]

Media Response

The *Daily Telegraph* and *Daily News* agreed that the report showed the subject was worth investigating.^[26] Positive reviews also appeared in the *Derbyshire Times*,^[27] *London Quarterly*^[28] and other commentary.^[29]

Other press reactions varied between bemusement and hostility. The *Times* reviewer called the Report a ‘farrago of impotent conclusions garnished by a mass of the most monstrous rubbish it has ever been our misfortune to sit in judgement upon’.^[50] *The Pall Mall Gazette* referred to its proceedings as ‘tedious’ and the cause of ‘contemptuous pain’ to the reader. The *Morning Post* described it as ‘entirely worthless’.^[51] The *Sporting Times*’ reviewer characterized Spiritualists as ‘rogues and vagabonds’ who should be ‘sent to the treadmill’.^[52]

The report was also harshly criticized in scientific and medical journals.^[53]

A more recent judgement is that the society, by using scientific methods of observation, attempted to steer a middle course that opened a new discourse without vindicating either spiritualists or sceptics.^[54]

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Endnotes

Footnotes

1. ^ Dyte (1869), 256.
2. ^ *London Dialectical Society* (1868-69), 29-31.
3. ^ *Report on Spiritualism* (1871), 1.

4. ^ Fodor (1934), 403.
5. ^ *Report on Spiritualism* (1871), 230.
6. ^ *Report on Spiritualism* (1871), 2-6.
7. ^ *Report on Spiritualism* (1871), 6.
8. ^ *Report on Spiritualism* (1871), 7-50.
9. ^ *Report on Spiritualism* (1871), 9.
10. ^ *Report on Spiritualism* (1871), 8-9.
11. ^ *Report on Spiritualism* (1871), 7.
12. ^ *Report on Spiritualism* (1871), 12.
13. ^ *Report on Spiritualism* (1871), 12.
14. ^ *Report on Spiritualism* (1871), 10-11.
15. ^ *Report on Spiritualism* (1871), 58.
16. ^ *Report on Spiritualism* (1871), 50-82.
17. ^ *Report on Spiritualism* (1871), 90-91.
18. ^ *Report on Spiritualism* (1871), 92.
19. ^ *Report on Spiritualism* (1871), 92-95.
20. ^ *Report on Spiritualism* (1871), 51, 55.
21. ^ *Report on Spiritualism* (1871), 93.
22. ^ *Report on Spiritualism* (1871), 83-90.
23. ^ *Report on Spiritualism* (1871), 104.
24. ^ *Report on Spiritualism* (1871), 99.
25. ^ *Report on Spiritualism* (1871), 100.
26. ^ *Report on Spiritualism* (1873), 5.
27. ^ *Derbyshire Times* (1871), 7.
28. ^ *London Quarterly Review* (1871), 519-23.
29. ^ For instance, Davies (1874), 139-40.
30. ^ *Report on Spiritualism* (1873), 1.
31. ^ *Report on Spiritualism* (1873), 5.
32. ^ *Report on Spiritualism* (1873), 7.
33. ^ For instance, *Medical Times and Gazette* (1871), 528-29.
34. ^ Alijaj (2019), 234, 239.