

Eleanor Sidgwick

Eleanor Sidgwick (1845-1936) was the wife of Cambridge philosopher Henry Sidgwick, a founder of the Society for Psychical Research and its first president. A mathematician and prominent educationalist, Sidgwick made a major contribution to the Society in its early years, in both administration and research.



Life and Background

Eleanor Mildred Sidgwick ('Nora') was a member of the wealthy and exceptionally distinguished Balfour family. Her uncle, Lord Robert Cecil, later the third Marquis of Salisbury, was prime minister for three periods between 1886 and 1892, being succeeded from 1902 to 1905 by Eleanor's brother Arthur (giving rise, it is alleged, to the phrase 'Bob's your uncle'). Arthur was later (1916-19) foreign secretary in Lloyd George's coalition government and occupied various other senior positions. He became first Earl of Balfour in 1922. Another of Eleanor's brothers, Gerald, a classical scholar, became a cabinet minister and in 1930 inherited Arthur's title. Yet another brother, Francis Maitland Balfour, an embryologist of outstanding promise, died tragically young in an Alpine climbing accident. Her brother-in-law, Lord Rayleigh, was an eminent physicist; and her husband, Henry Sidgwick, was the leading Cambridge philosopher of his day (Arthur was his pupil) and a pioneer of higher education for women. All these family members except for Salisbury were to become presidents of the SPR.

Eleanor's father died in 1856, and she and her seven siblings (two boys and five girls, all younger than her) were largely brought up by their widowed mother in a deeply religious but far from intellectually narrow household. All were encouraged to pursue their intellectual interests. Eleanor showed a particular interest in and aptitude for mathematics, which she studied privately. She was well-read in English literature, and fluent or competent in several foreign languages (the family travelled abroad a good deal). Her mother also believed in charitable work and the value of acquiring practical skills: for a while she shared the duties of cook in a large house.

After 1869, when she began to act as hostess and housekeeper for her brother Arthur at his houses in Scotland and London, Eleanor's intellectual and practical gifts gradually became apparent to a widening circle. Through Arthur she became involved in the movement for the higher education of women, and in the investigation of psychic phenomena, and met her husband-to-be and close collaborator in these endeavours, Henry Sidgwick, whom she married in 1876. It appears that for a while she studied for a mathematical qualification that would have enabled her to read for the Cambridge Mathematical Tripos. Her coach, NM

Ferrers, a celebrated mathematician and teacher, soon to become Master of Caius College, was known to hold the opinion^[1] that had she continued 'she would have been a high Wrangler' (in other words would have passed at the level of a high first class honours degree)^[2] but she gave up the idea in view of the extra calls on her time entailed by marriage.^[3] Nonetheless a few years later her name appeared jointly with that of her brother-in-law Lord Rayleigh on three papers in the *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society*, concerning the recalculation of the standard units of electrical measurement, work for which her meticulous accuracy in recording readings and her mathematical talents in checking calculations were well suited.

Her principal lines of endeavour, however, remained in the higher education of women and in psychical research, in both of which areas she accomplished far more than most people, however able and hard-working, could have achieved in a lifetime devoted to either. She became treasurer of the Newnham College Association in 1879 and remained as treasurer of Newnham College until 1920 – no light task during a time of rapid advancement and expansion.^[4] She was vice-principal of Newnham from 1880 to 1882 and principal from 1892 to 1910, a position which entailed heavy responsibilities and considerable administrative ability. All this was in addition to a good deal of nation-wide activity on behalf of women's education.

During the same period and beyond she was also centrally involved in the affairs of the SPR. This was founded in 1882, and although she did not officially join until 1884 – according to Ethel Sidgwick^[5] it was felt unwise to link the aspiring college too publicly with 'what was likely to be regarded as a cranky society' – in practice she was never uninvolved, particularly, of course, since her husband was its first president. Between them they did a great deal to shape not just the activities of the Society, but what might be called its tone.

Yet in many respects they were very different characters. Though not without a certain dry humour,^[6] Eleanor was a quiet, reserved, somewhat shy person, slight in build and wholly unassertive. She disliked giving talks and lectures, but would always do so when it was required. Even in private committee meetings she said little, though what she did say came to carry great weight. Henry, on the other hand, was a brilliant, though never domineering, conversationalist, a wit, a practised lecturer, a member of many committees, and an enthusiastic participant in many debating societies. But in important matters they had much in common. Both were driven by a strong sense of duty and gave generous support to the causes they supported. Both shared the same dominant aspirations and were largely agreed as to how they should be pursued. Thus in psychical research both emphasized the need for careful assessment of evidence, for the continued accumulation of data, for caution in interpreting those data, and for exploring all sides of any question. The SPR, they always insisted, should hold no corporate opinions.

Psychical Research

A good deal of Eleanor Sidgwick's work for the Society and for the subject was done unknown to the membership at large and out of her conscientious sense of duty. She helped a good deal with editorial matters and committee work, gave quiet private advice, was one of those much involved in the considerable background work that went into the Society's first major production, *Phantasms of the Living*.^[7] She was on the centrally important committee responsible for overseeing and writing up the pioneering and large-scale *Census of Hallucinations*.^[8] She was honorary secretary from 1907 to 1932, a period which included World War I and the following years and naturally brought the Society considerable problems. WH Salter, who was himself honorary secretary for many years, concurred with the then secretary Isabel Newton that nobody but Eleanor Sidgwick could have carried the Society through those difficult years with success.^[9]

Publications

As with her administrative activities, so, one suspects, with her publications – a fair number of them may have been undertaken not from enthusiasm (open enthusiasm was not perhaps one of her more frequently expressed emotions) but from her pervasive sense of duty, as something that needed doing and wouldn't get done properly if she didn't do it. This may well have been quite often true of her fairly numerous book reviews and her occasional responses to criticism of the Society's publications, and it is hard to imagine that it was not true also of some of her rather longer pieces, for instance her 1887 article on 'Spiritualism' for the ninth edition of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, her one-volume abridgement of *Phantasms of the Living* (1919), and the time-consuming but essential work she undertook in connection with the 'cross-correspondences' by tabulating for each of the various automatists the date at which they first got to know the contents of each script of the others. (This work was privately printed in 1921 but did not become generally available for some 50 years.)

Her earliest practical experiences in psychical research had been, as mentioned above, in the 1870s with a group of friends of her brother Arthur. This group included or came to include Henry Sidgwick, Frederic Myers, Edmund Gurney, Walter Leaf, her sister Evelyn and the latter's husband Lord Rayleigh. Over a period of several years they held sittings with several mediums, some of whom were or became famous. Most were physical mediums, and the overall effect, on Eleanor (as on most of the group) was to impress her with the possibilities or actualities of fraud, inspiring particular caution as to that class of alleged phenomena.

Not long after the foundation of the SPR Eleanor Sidgwick published an account of these experiences,^[10] and in the same year she edited for publication^[11] various accounts sent to the Society of the performances (mainly but not exclusively slate-writing) of William Eglinton, a physical medium then becoming well-known. She made clear, with reasons, her firm conviction that those performances were all attributable to conjuring. Her opinions were strongly contested by Spiritualists, to whom she became something of a *bête noire*, an attitude not helped by her *Britannica* article mentioned above, or by her highly critical paper on 'spirit photography'.^[12] She remarked, however, at the end of her article on her own experiences^[13] that 'it is not because I disbelieve in the physical phenomena of

Spiritualism, but because I at present think it more probable that such things occasionally occur, that I am interested in estimating the evidence for them.'

Sidgwick's last practical involvements in the investigation of such phenomena came in 1894 and 1895 when she joined with her husband and other leading members of the SPR in sittings in France and Cambridge with the celebrated Neapolitan medium Eusapia Palladino. The Sidgwicks were not convinced by anything they witnessed, and the sittings caused a good deal of controversy.^[14]

Another area of practical work in which Sidgwick was involved was that of experiments on 'thought-transference' under hypnosis.^[15] Subjects included the telepathic anaesthetization of a selected finger, the telepathic transfer of mental images, and the telepathic transfer of two-figure numbers. The hypnotist for most of the sessions was GA Smith. Success was very variable, but was apparently sometimes obtained, especially with the two-figure numbers, even when conditions were made as strict as possible. From a modern point of view the experiments are a curious mixture of the relatively formal and the relatively informal, and again I will not attempt to analyze them here. It is worth noting, however, her assistant Alice Johnson's comments on Sidgwick's qualities as an experimenter.^[16]

I was impressed by her unwearied patience through a long sequence of tedious experiments; she seemed never to relax her efforts, and never seemed bored. She treated all the persons concerned with the utmost consideration... as if they were human beings, not mere subjects for experiment, and they became much attached to her and liked to talk to her in the intervals about their own affairs.

A good deal more of Sidgwick's working time was spent in examining, classifying and discussing apparently spontaneous cases of telepathy and presumed kindred phenomena than in trying to induce such phenomena experimentally. Her gift for subduing and organizing large quantities of refractory material showed up to considerable advantage when it came to handling the case reports which regularly came into the Society from one source and another.

The first of her articles that might be placed under this heading is one on 'phantasms of the dead' published in 1885. This is a highly systematic piece, in which she sets out possible ordinary explanations of why certain highly unusual, perhaps hallucinatory, perhaps even paranormal, experiences might come to be thought to originate in some way, telepathic or other, from the spirits of the departed. She cites with supporting witness statements quite a number of cases, some of them highly evocative, but concludes that in general there is nothing by which we can distinguish them from simple subjective hallucinations. It seems to me that some of them, subjective or otherwise, are hardly simple, but I agree with her that the rather scanty information generally conveyed is insufficient to pinpoint any particular deceased person, and that the quite numerous instances of seemingly similar apparitions frequenting the same locality do not compensate for this deficiency. She thinks, however, that the inquiry, though likely to be long and difficult, is worth pursuing with patience and energy.

Apparitions

Sidgwick wrote two further articles, one on the evidence for premonitions^[17] and one on the evidence for clairvoyance.^[18] These, though not without interest, are arguably too encumbered by matters of definition to allow much direct comparison with current work in those areas. However, she was also involved in perhaps the most remarkable work ever undertaken in the empirical study of spontaneous cases of presumed telepathy. This originated from a project of Edmund Gurney^[19] a project for which, as mentioned above, Sidgwick did a good deal of background work. During its early years the SPR collected through private enquiries and advertisement in 'respectable' periodicals, a large number of accounts of past and recent cases of apparitions, haunted houses, poltergeists and suchlike, for each of which written witness testimony, preferably first-hand, was required. It soon became apparent that among these cases was a surprising number of cases of recognized apparitions that coincided quite closely in time with some misadventure (frequently death) to the distant, hitherto living, individual thus recognised. These appearances, classified within the general heading of 'phantasms of the living', became known as 'crisis apparitions', a term which was soon extended to include auditory cases. Gurney, along with most of his colleagues, supposed that these episodes could best be regarded as telepathically engendered hallucinations, with the percipient becoming telepathically aware of the misfortune of the distant individual.

To eliminate the possibility that the coincidences between the apparitions and the deaths could simply be ascribed to chance, Gurney conducted a census in which 5705 persons were in effect asked if they had, while awake and in good health, ever had a recognized hallucination of a person known to them. Hallucinations occurring within twelve hours either way of the death of the individual recognized were counted as crisis apparitions. The number of crisis greatly exceeded the number that would be predicted from the death rate *per diem* across the country over the same period.^[20]

It was decided that a much larger census was called for, 50,000 persons being the target (though in the end only 17,000 were canvassed), and a six-person committee was formed to implement the plan. Unfortunately Gurney died in 1888 and much of the work devolved upon Sidgwick aided by Alice Johnson, while Henry Sidgwick chaired the quite numerous meetings. Though the report was published as if from the chairman, most of the actual writing, according to Johnson^[21] was done by Sidgwick, who also worked out the statistical calculations. Frederic Myers and Frank Podmore helped with the actual casework, and Myers contributed an Appendix G, in which, contra Gurney, he argues that in certain cases an apparition may involve or occasion an actual change in that part of the world where it seemingly manifests. His brother Arthur advised on the medical aspects of certain cases.

The committee's report^[22] is a whisker under 400 pages in length. It tackles of course the problem raised by Gurney of whether or not the quite numerous coincidences between recognised 'crisis apparitions' and the deaths of the individuals thus recognised could reasonably be dismissed as due to chance, but also provides a great deal of tabulated information, with illustrative cases, about the general characteristics of the sporadic waking hallucinations undergone (more

frequently than had been previously supposed) by persons whom there was no reason to regard as other than sane and sober. The census question (essentially the same as Gurney's) was put by 410 volunteer, mostly SPR members, to a very large number of adult persons, of whom 17,000 supplied answers. Of these, 1,684 had had one or more recognised hallucination (visual or other) of a person known to them. The total number of such hallucinations being 1,942. Of these rather over 300 were visual hallucinations of persons recognized by the percipient of which 80 were death coincidences, that is, occurred within 12 hours either way of the death concerned. When various less well-evidenced cases were removed, and the number of likely non-coincidental cases was adjusted to allow for the manifest fact that such cases were more likely to be forgotten than ones that had coincided with deaths, the final estimate was that there were around 32 death-coincidences out of 1300 cases, which was 440 times the number predicted from the death-rate figures over the relevant period. These figures certainly suggest that there is a more than chance connection between the apparitions and the deaths.^[23]

Almost thirty years later Sidgwick (1923) collected and analyzed in her usual systematic way the various comparable case received by the SPR since the time of *Phantasms of the Living*. Some of these are certainly remarkable. Towards the end^[24] she engages in some theoretical speculations – something about which she was always cautious – as to the nature of the telepathic process, which, in some cases at least, she regarded as involving a kind of union of minds. In the following year she published some interesting speculations – backed as always by empirical data – as to the origins of the various distortions and transmogrifications that seem so readily to find their way into telepathic messages.^[25]

Mental Mediumship

Sidgwick's remaining publications have to do in whole or part with her work in connection with mental mediumship, particularly with the American trance medium Leonora Piper, the British trance medium Gladys Osborne Leonard, and various automatists who became involved in the 'cross- correspondence' scripts.

Piper, though American, became personally known to a number of leading members of the British SPR during three extended visits which she paid to Britain under the aegis of the SPR: in November 1889-February 1890, November 1906-June 1907, and October 1909-May 1911, during the last of which she was unwell for a good deal of the time. The sittings Sidgwick attended were not markedly successful, but others were, and she herself became entirely convinced that on frequent occasions Piper exhibited knowledge of matters that she could not have learned about by ordinary means.

The longest and most remarkable of Sidgwick's contributions to the Piper literature was her 657 page study of the psychology of Piper's trance mediumship published in 1915.^[26] A principal aim was to criticize Richard Hodgson's view that the 'spirits' ostensibly communicating through Piper were (as they claimed to be) intelligences independent of her and of each other, and to propose instead that they were just phases, or variant centres of consciousness, of Piper herself. In order to attack this question she read (assisted by her brother Gerald) all the available records of Piper sittings – a very considerable task. Even to read her book-length article, with its

illustrative extracts from the records, is no light job, but one that anyone seriously interested in its subject-matter needs to undertake.

It was quite clear to Sidgwick, as it had been to others, that not a few of the spirits who purportedly spoke or wrote through Piper, were mere fictions, as were some of the preposterous fictional versions of 'real' personages who put in an appearance, for instance a 'Julius Caesar' who sometimes spelled his name with a 'z', a 'George Eliot' who claimed to have met Adam Bede, and a 'Sir Walter Scott' who gave a stilted and absurdly erroneous guided tour of the solar system. Even some of the most convincing controls and communicators could quickly become bogged down if required to talk on subjects (science, philosophy, literature, classical languages) familiar to them in life, but not so to Piper.^[27] Even worse, perhaps, for the status of the Piper controls was the fact that some of the most convincing ones, who may be very life-like in some respects and may display a remarkable amount of knowledge concerning their earthly lives and concerns, may unhesitatingly guarantee the genuineness of the most absurd ones, making inescapable the conclusion that all are bit-players in a fantasy-drama of Piper's own making.

What in Sidgwick's opinion is the nature of this fantasy-drama? She does indeed allow scope to the analogy of a drama, but does not think this implies that there any divided-off parts of Piper that assume and retain the characters of the leading controls, any more than the character of Hamlet survives once the performance is over. She proposes instead that the best analogy 'to the controls of Mrs. Piper's trance is probably to be found in the personations that can be obtained through suggestion with some hypnotised persons.'^[28] In the current instance, of course, the hypnosis and suggestion are likely to be self-induced, with the medium picking up and responding to whatever hints and snippets of information come their way.

Among the possible sources of ideas and information for such auto-suggested personations Sidgwick includes telepathy. She was fully convinced that the entranced Piper often exhibited that elusive faculty. And she more than once emphasized that though in her opinion the various controls and communicators were not independent beings, but auto-hypnotically engendered phases of Piper herself, fed at times by telepathically received information, this did not rule out a real communicator behind the scenes, shaping and influencing Piper's personation.

With Gladys Osborne Leonard, a medium with obvious similarities to but also differences from Piper, Sidgwick had fewer direct dealings, but none the less formed a very high opinion of her gifts. The one substantial paper that she wrote about her concerned what were called 'book tests'.^[29] The origin of these is uncertain, though Leonard became their best-known practitioner. The general idea was that a sitter visiting Leonard should receive from a communicator related or otherwise known to that sitter, and via Leonard's control 'Fedra', information concerning the contents of a specified page (often also a line) in a specified book in a specified location in a house usually well-known in life to that communicator and currently accessible to that sitter. The line or page should be unmistakably meaningful in connection with the ostensible communicator. Since the chosen book need not be known to the sitter, or indeed be known in sufficient detail to anyone living, simple telepathy with the living would not be a plausible explanation of a sustained good success rate.

The sitters involved in the series examined by Sidgwick (yielding 532 book tests in all) were mainly trusted members of the SPR or their colleagues. Some of the sittings were quite remarkable, and overall Sidgwick classified 92 as successful and 204 as complete failures, although the question of how one should think of the successes raises some rather complex issues.^[30]

Cross-Correspondences

Sidgwick was also involved with the ‘cross-correspondences’, the prolonged series of apparent interrelated automatisms (mostly but not entirely automatic writings) produced between 1904 and 1936 by ladies linked to the SPR^[31] over that period and even later. Papers on the cross-correspondence scripts filled a great many pages of the SPR Proceedings. They supposedly originated from several distinguished but deceased early members of the Society whose idea was to communicate linked messages through each of several automatists who would not know what the others had received, and preferably to do so in such a way that the meaning of the whole would not be revealed until all were brought together. Sidgwick clearly thought highly of such correspondences as potential evidence for survival, in that the plan of each of them would not be in the mind of any single living person and therefore could not have been divined through telepathy from the living.^[32] But setting aside her 1921 ‘List of scripts’ mentioned above, and perhaps also her rebuttal of Joseph Maxwell’s criticisms of the whole enterprise,^[33] her contributions to the huge cross-correspondence literature were surprisingly few and not of great importance, appearing to end in 1921, despite the fact that she was closely linked to several of the principal individuals involved in analyzing the scripts

The following considerations may supply a clue. Around 1912 some interpretations of the cross-correspondences, not published at the time, had begun to develop a curiously messianic tinge – kept secret for many decades afterwards – the original source of which was certain statements by ostensible communicators through the mediumship of ‘Mrs Willett’ (Winifred Coombe-Tennant). With these, or perhaps somewhat preceding them, there developed a marked relaxation of the evidential standards originally adopted by those studying and collating the scripts, and writing papers about them. It is difficult to believe that a person of Sidgwick’s critical mind and balanced views could have failed to be worried about this decline. In her final article in 1933^[34] she (quite rightly) still presents the cross-correspondences as a highly important development in the history of the Society but does not indicate any specially significant later developments in them.

Perhaps these developments put her in an awkward quandary. For the ‘messianic child’ central to them was in fact the son of her brother Gerald by the medium ‘Mrs Willett’ and was thus her nephew.^[35] Gerald, later the second Lord Balfour, with whom Eleanor Sidgwick shared a house from 1915, had – along with JG Piddington and to an extent Alice Johnson – become infatuated with the messianic angle, and the accompanying ‘story’ and ‘plan’ (for the world), and began to find indications of it widely scattered throughout the whole corpus of cross-correspondence scripts, especially when they were over-ingeniously interpreted in literary and symbolic terms. It is worth noting that already in 1913, in her interesting reply to Joseph Maxwell’s criticisms of the cross-correspondence methodology, Sidgwick^[36] both

defends (up to a point) the use of symbols, and issues the following prescient warning: ‘we must all admit that great care should be exercised not to let our imaginations run away with us, and not to assume doubtful interpretations to be certain.’^[37]

The ‘final article’ just mentioned is a valuable brief review of the SPR’s history from the point of view of an insider. Alice Johnson remarks^[38] that in one respect it resembles *Hamlet* without the Prince, for – characteristically – Eleanor Sidgwick makes very little reference to her own contributions to that history. I hope I have managed to make it clear how big an omission that was.

Alan Gauld

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Endnotes

Footnotes

1. ^ Sidgwick, Ethel (1938), 66-67.
2. ^ At this period, and for many decades afterwards, qualified women students were allowed to sit the Cambridge Tripos examinations and have their results placed in an order alongside that of the men, but (quite irrationally) not to receive degrees.
3. ^ Sidgwick, Ethel (1938), 66-67.
4. ^ Newnham College Register.
5. ^ Sidgwick, Ethel (1938), 2.
6. ^ Salter (1958), 239.
7. ^ Gurney et al (1886).
8. ^ Sidgwick, H. et al (1894).
9. ^ Salter (1936-7), 95.
10. ^ Sidgwick, E.M. (1886-7).
11. ^ Sidgwick, E.M. (1885-6).
12. ^ Sidgwick, E.M. (1891-2b).
13. ^ Sidgwick, E.M. (1886-7), 74.
14. ^ I have discussed these and related sittings at some length in Gauld (1968), 221-45.
15. ^ Sidgwick H. et al (1889); Sidgwick and Johnson (1892).
16. ^ Johnson (1937), 63-64.
17. ^ Sidgwick, E.M. (1889).
18. ^ Sidgwick. E.M. (1891-2a).
19. ^ see Gurney et al (1886).
20. ^ Gurney et al (1886) 2, 6-24.
21. ^ Johnson (1937), 67.
22. ^ Sidgwick, H. et al (1894).
23. ^ Various contemporary critics suggested possible, but to my mind not very convincing, reasons why this connection may after all have been spurious. I summarize their arguments and the various replies in Gauld (1968), 184-85.
24. ^ Sidgwick, H. et al (1894).
25. ^ Sidgwick, E.M. (1924).
26. ^ Sidgwick, E.M. (1915); it was preceded in 1900 by a much shorter paper of similar purport, Sidgwick, E.M. (1900).
27. ^ Sidgwick, however, fair as always, expressed the view (1915, 316n) that Piper, though no intellectual, was not as ignorant as these controls.
28. ^ Sidgwick, E.M. (1915), 326.
29. ^ Sidgwick, E.M. (1921b).
30. ^ Briefly touched on in Gauld (1982), 49.
31. ^ See in particular Hamilton (2017).
32. ^ Sidgwick, E.M. (1918), 254-56.
33. ^ Sidgwick, E.M. (1913).
34. ^ Sidgwick, E.M. (1933).
35. ^ On the subsequent career of this child, who grew into an adult of considerable gifts, but absolutely no messianic tendencies, see Roy (2008).
36. ^ Sidgwick, E.M. (1913).
37. ^ Sidgwick, E.M. (1913), 392.
38. ^ Johnson (1937), 54.

