

Smith and Blackburn

Douglas Blackburn (1857-1929) was a Brighton journalist, George Albert Smith (1864-1959) a mesmerist performing on the Brighton stage. In 1883, the pair took part in experiments with the Society for Psychical Research, the outcome apparently supporting the existence of telepathy. Years later Blackburn published an article in the popular press claiming that he and Smith had conspired to dupe the investigators. Smith forcefully denied this,^[1] while the SPR argued in detail that the cheating methods that Blackburn described could not have worked under the conditions in which the experiments were carried out. The affair continues to provoke controversy.

Original Experiments

In 1882, the newly founded Society for Psychical Research published its first positive assessment of the phenomenon of 'thought-reading' (as telepathy was then known), mainly based on experiments with three young girls, daughters of a clergyman named Creery, who appeared to be remarkably gifted in that activity. An appendix quoted a letter in the Spiritualist periodical *Light* that mentioned the equally astonishing abilities of a 'Mr. Smith, of Brighton'.^[2] The letter was written by Douglas Blackburn, the editor of a Brighton paper and Smith's partner in the thought-reading activity. Blackburn wrote: '[Smith] places himself *en rapport* with myself by taking my hands; and a strong concentration of will and mental vision on my part has enabled him to read my thoughts with an accuracy that approaches the miraculous.' This prompted a follow-up visit in December 1882 by SPR investigators Frederic Myers and Edmund Gurney, who travelled to Brighton and tested the pair in their (Myers' and Gurney's) hotel rooms.

The SPR's subsequent report^[3] stated that Smith was blindfolded at his own wish to aid in concentration, and during the experiment sat with his back turned to the experimenters. Smith, holding Blackburn's hand, was asked to name a colour written down by Myers or Gurney and shown to Blackburn. In addition to colours, Myers and Gurney experimented in the transfer of numbers, diagrams and random drawings, also of physical pains, often with remarkable accuracy. Though it was stressed that 'the strictest silence was preserved during each experiment' it was not made absolutely clear in every case whether or not Blackburn held Smith's hand, and for how long. It was noted that all trials on numbers, and when Smith and Blackburn were in separate rooms, failed. It was also observed that though Smith seemed to perceive simple geometrical diagrams accurately, he generally reversed upper and lower and left and right elements.

The investigators were impressed by the close resemblance on the second day of experiments between Smith's drawings and their own, which had become increasingly varied and irregular. They stated, 'the results of these trials give us the most important and valuable insight into the manner of the mental transfer of a picture which we have yet obtained'. While they initially allowed physical contact between Smith and Blackburn, they said that in later refinements of the experiments, 'no contact whatever' between the two was found to be necessary.

A report of more in-depth experiments attempted to record and communicate the exact conditions of each experiment, so that 'the reader will thus be enabled to form an independent judgement by making allowance for whatever mental bias he may discover in our conclusions'.^[4] Smith was seated blindfolded (although sometimes he was allowed to take it off) at a table with pencil and paper, and with an SPR committee member beside him. Blackburn was called out of the room while another committee member drew a random figure. Blackburn returned in silence and positioned himself, sitting or standing, two feet behind Smith. There was 'unbroken and absolute silence' amongst all present. Any occasion on which Blackburn touched Smith, or went within his possible field of vision, was noted. The results were impressive. Only eight of the total of 37 experiments were recorded as unsuccessful, and four of these were ruled out anyway, as the committee had allowed some hand contact between the two of them. Twenty-two transmitted drawings were appended to the report and, in different ways, all demonstrated a considerable similarity to the core elements of the original.

Discussing the possibility of collusion, the committee stated that tasting, smelling, touch and sight were excluded by the conditions of the experiment. They examined the possibility of aural clues being given through whispering, or other kinds of audible signals. They considered this to be unlikely but hoped by varying the conditions of subsequent experiments to exclude it completely. They found it difficult to conceive how the detailed and complex signalling required to convey sufficient information for Smith to accurately reproduce the original drawing, and in its appropriate proportions, could be managed without being detected. They wrote:

[W]ith the view of removing all doubts that might arise as to possible auditory communications, we on one occasion stopped Mr. Smith's ears with putty, then tied a bandage round his eyes and ears, then fastened a bolster-case [long pillow-case] over the head, and over all threw a blanket which enveloped his entire head and trunk. Fig 22 was now

drawn by one of us, and shewn outside the room to Mr Blackburn, who on his return sat behind Mr Smith, and in no contact with him whatever, and as perfectly still as it is possible for a human being to sit who is not concentrating his attention on keeping motionless to the exclusion of every other object.

After a few minutes Smith produced a good representation of the original drawing. The committee, however, was still careful to point out that it was not completely impossible that some kind of code based on 'periodic variations in Mr Blackburn's breathing imperceptible to us' may have been in operation.

In this report it was not clear that the experiments took place both in January and in April 1883. That has had to be inferred from the dates written on the original drawing, April 20, 21 and 23.^[5] After this, Blackburn had no further direct connection with the SPR but in 1884 he published a short book on thought-reading in which, while not stating that thought-reading had been proved, he wrote positively about the SPR and encouraged his readers to write to the Society if they had any interesting experiences to communicate.^[6]

Experiments with Smith Alone

In 1889 Sidgwick, together with his wife and collaborator Eleanor, began working with Smith as a hypnotist, in what was possibly the first use of the 'forced choice' method that was later adopted by Joseph Rhine in order to establish a statistical basis.^[7] In later experiments conducted by Eleanor Sidgwick and Alice Johnson in the period 1890-92,^[8] target numbers from 10 to 90 were selected randomly and the hypnotized percipients achieved the remarkable result of 117 hits out of 664, although potential flaws of inadequate randomization and the possibility of Smith conveying information by his language, breathing and movements could not be completely ruled out.

The Significance of the Experiments

Outlining the SPR's results in a 1884 lecture, its president Henry Sidgwick stressed three converging lines of evidence: thought-transference experiments between persons in a normal waking state; similar experiments involving hypnosis; and anecdotal reports of spontaneous occurrences, including apparitions that conveyed true information unknown to the witness at the time. The SPR's experiments, he emphasized, should be distinguished from demonstrations by stage performers of 'thought-reading' that had attracted much attention in recent years.^[9] Of all this successful activity, the Smith-Blackburn experiments amounted to a very small proportion. It should also be noted that, in a section describing the thought-transference of drawings in his major work *Phantasms of the Living*, Gurney did not reference the Smith and Blackburn drawings, but rather a separate series that involved multiple agents and subjects.

William James was impressed by the second Smith-Blackburn series, particularly by the fact that the drawings were deliberate and continuous, not hesitant, as would be the case if the person doing the drawing was waiting for a signal. James shrewdly contrasted 'the possibility *in abstracto* of framing a code of signals for such drawings with the ease *in concreto* of using such a code'.^[10]

Blackburn's Later Claims

From today's perspective, these early investigative reports are marred by lack of detail and vagueness. It is not always clear which member of the committee did what, or where they were situated, or where Smith and Blackburn were at all times. Later accounts imply that other observers were in attendance, and their participation might have given Blackburn and Smith opportunities for surreptitious communication.^[11] Blackburn might have used the technique of distraction, as when he complained of neuralgia or the need to more tightly bandage his eyes to improve concentration. Ideally, researchers should demonstrate that the possibility of collusion has been ruled out by the design of the experiment.^[12] However, the initial reactions within the SPR were cautiously positive.

In articles published in 1907-8, critics argued that evidence indicative of deception during the Smith-Blackburn experiments had been suspected by one or more of the observers and that, when extra precautions were taken against the use of secret codes – such as Smith being enclosed in a pillow-case - the experiments failed. In fact, these assertions were at odds with the published report, which stated the reverse: no cheating was observed and the trial in which the pillow-case had been used produced significant results.

However, the articles may have been a spur to Blackburn to start making assertions of the same kind. Having spent some years in South Africa, he returned to England in 1908, and, apparently believing his erstwhile colleague Smith had died, published six articles in the popular weekly magazine *John Bull* describing their early experiments with the SPR

(December 1908 to January 1909).^[13] The first article was entitled ‘Confessions of a Famous Medium: Story of the Great “Scientific Hoax”’. Blackburn painted Myers and Gurney as courteous but hopelessly out of touch with real world cunning: poor observers and too eager to believe in the existence of telepathy. He and Smith, Blackburn asserted, were virtually able to impose their own conditions, and deceived them by using codes or by reading Myers’s involuntary muscular movements. He also described two methods by which, he claimed, it had been possible to draw the more difficult irregular shapes, and gave an extravagant account of how he had deceived Myers and a colleague after bumping into them in the street.

A second ‘sensational’ exposure, titled ‘Confessions of a Telepathist’ appeared in the *Daily News* of September 1st 1911 and continued the same theme.

I am the sole survivor of that group of experimentalists, and as no harm can be done to anyone, but possible good to the cause of truth, I, with mingled feelings of regret and satisfaction, now declare that the whole of those alleged experiments were bogies, and originated in the honest desire of two youths to show how easily men of scientific mind and training could be deceived when seeking for evidence in support of a theory they were wishful to establish.

And here let me say that I make this avowal in no boastful spirit. Within three months of our acquaintance with the leading members of the Society for Psychical Research Mr. Smith and myself heartily regretted that these personally charming and scientifically distinguished men should have been victimised; but it was too late to recant. We did the next best thing. We stood aside and watched with amazement the astounding spread of the fire we had in a spirit of mischief lighted.^[14]

The following week he replied in detail to an indignant denial by Smith. Blackburn returned to the subject in *The Sunday Times* of 16th September 1917, in which he also alleged credulity on the part of the scientists and psychical researcher Oliver Lodge.

These articles appeared devastating to the reputation of the founders of the SPR and the quality of their early investigations. Blackburn’s comments about Smith’s background as a public performer and the possible use of codes are potentially relevant, given the skilled performances to be seen in the field of hypnotism then and now. Smith had strong links with the public performance of mesmerism and thought-reading in his early years. The *Hove Courier* for 15 April 1882 described him as ‘a clever mesmerist at present mystifying Brighton audiences’. The *Brightonian* for 30 September 1882 announced that that Smith would shortly perform in the Brighton Aquarium’s Lecture Room where he would exhibit ‘the higher phenomena of mesmerism, and in conjunction with Mr Douglas Blackburn give demonstrations of Thought Reading’.

According to an analysis by Tom Ruffles, the thought-reading element in Smith’s performances could potentially have been enabled through a combination of muscle reading (there was hand contact) and the use of codes (Washington Bishop’s book on the subject had been published in 1880 and he was giving demonstrations in Brighton in the second half of 1881). On the other hand, as Ruffles points out, Smith continued to help its researchers investigate hypnotic phenomena until Gurney’s death in 1898, and remained an associate member for some time afterwards^[15] - which would hardly have happened if Smith’s motivation was merely to expose gullible researchers.

Weaknesses in Blackburn’s Claims

On close examination, features emerge that argue against the superficial impression of plausibility in Blackburn’s accusations. One is his grandiose language and curiously self-inflating view of himself as a ‘sensational’ journalist. Notably, his claim regarding his ‘long acquaintance with and personal knowledge of the leading Occultists of the last forty years’ was almost entirely untrue. He presents himself in a highly flattering light with regard to the SPR, which he criticizes in sweeping but quite unrealistic terms. He contradicted himself on a number of occasions. His description of the experiments conflicts with the narrative published in the *Proceedings* of the SPR. Finally, it is unclear why, if the motivation was to expose the gullibility of psychical researchers, the revelations were not made soon after the event, instead of more than two decades later.

Notable errors, exaggerations and inconsistencies in Blackburn’s assertions include the following:

- ‘The SPR approached Blackburn to initiate the experiments.’ It was rather Blackburn who first approached the SPR.
- ‘Henry Sidgwick had intervened in the controversy in 1911.’ By this time, Sidgwick had been dead for eleven years.
- ‘All the participants were dead before he revealed the “hoax”.’ It would not have been difficult to ascertain that they were all still living, especially in the case of Sidgwick and Smith, who both had a public profile.

- ‘Smith bribed his early subjects to pretend to be hypnotised.’ Elsewhere, Blackburn paid fulsome tribute to Smith’s genuine powers as a hypnotist.
- ‘It was he [Blackburn] who detected the thought-transference methods used by the stage performer Stuart Bishop.’ In reality, this was done earlier by others.
- ‘The tests were done in Blackburn’s rooms.’ They took place in Myers’s and Gurney’s hotel rooms in Brighton, and later in Dean’s Yard, Westminster, where the SPR was headquartered.
- ‘He and Smith were allowed to impose their own controls.’ This may have been true to some extent, but it is expressly contradicted by the report with regard to certain experiments.
- ‘He personally witnessed the “slackness” with which the SPR carried out its investigations with other sensitives.’ Also, ‘he could fill columns describing his later investigations on behalf of the SPR’. In reality, his work with the SPR was limited to the three series of experiments with Blackburn, after which he lost contact with it.

Blackburn’s account of how he and Smith deceived the SPR when Smith was swaddled in blankets, radically differs from the official account (his movements and noise would have been spotted).

The Cambridge philosopher CD Broad, in a later analysis, pointed out other errors and dubious statements with regard to the pillow-case experiment:

- Blackburn was shown the drawing in a different room, not the same room, as he alleged.
- Smith did not produce a single perfect copy, but rather made several approximate attempts.
- The amount of time between Blackburn’s seeing the drawing and Smith’s drawing was exaggerated by Blackburn – the experimenters would certainly have noted the amount of time taken and his extravagant movements. ^[16]

Contrasting Impressions of Honesty

The two men’s subsequent careers following their collaboration with the SPR give quite different impressions of their personal integrity.

Blackburn left Brighton for London in 1884, having become embroiled in a libel case, a divorce case, and the failure of the papers he edited.^[17] He later embarked on a career as a journalist in South Africa, where he was prosecuted for libel on eight separate occasions; affronted the Boers’ religious sensibilities by publishing a fanciful story about a cherubim being shot out of the sky; and invented a bogus pedigree for Viljoen, a Boer general – among other escapades.

Blackburn possessed real writing talent and gained a reputation as a writer of fiction on South African themes. However, he was chronically short of money all his life: a prime motive for his claims with regard to the SPR experiments appears to have been the need for cash and to publicize his books. His own biography in *South African Who’s Who* seems to have been largely made up.^[18]

By contrast, Smith strongly impressed those who had dealings with him.^[19] He became Edmund Gurney’s secretary in April 1883 and acted as the Society’s leading hypnotist in its telepathic and other experiments. The researchers were confident that the percipients in these experiments were not his stooges.

Gurney died in 1888, and Smith later embarked on a successful career in cinematic development, which he helped pioneer. One of his early films was given a private showing to Queen Victoria and he received a silver medal from the Royal Society of Arts for his cinematic work. He had invented the Kinemacolor process and helped roll it out across Britain and America in partnership with Charles Urban. He demonstrated it personally to Edward VII; their company went on to film Edward’s funeral, George V’s coronation and the imperial crowning in India. He retired at 51 and thereafter directed his still considerable intellectual energy into astronomy, living quietly in Sussex until his nineties, free from controversy. At his death the SPR *Journal* published a highly positive tribute.^[20]

Smith’s Response

The SPR secretary Alice Johnson interviewed Smith in 1908, following the appearance of the first two *John Bull* articles, and concluded that ‘he never took part in any deception and acted honestly throughout.’ She produced a leaflet on the affair, but only circulated it to members of Council and to specific individual enquirers.

Following Blackburn’s second ‘exposure’ article in 1911 Smith responded publicly for the first time, stating in the *Daily News* ‘that Mr Blackburn’s story is a tissue of errors from beginning to end’^[21],

In the first place I most emphatically deny that I ever in any degree, in any way, when working thirty years ago with Mr Blackburn, attempted to bamboozle Messrs Myers, Gurney and Podmore. Had such a thing been possible I had too much admiration and respect for them and too much respect for myself to try. These gentlemen, long before they met us, had spent years in investigating psychic phenomena, and were aware of every device and dodge for making sham phenomena. They were on the watch not only for premeditated trickery, but for unconscious trickery as well. You could not deceive them, and the quack mediums hated them in consequence...

Were it not for the teaching of Myers and Gurney on the unreliability of human evidence Mr Blackburn could not say what he has said. He is merely repeating what they taught him. The finest expositions of such unreliability are by Myers and Gurney. They were so highly equipped for this work that the best trick mediums could never do their tricks in their presence. I was most closely associated with both men, being private secretary to each in turn, and speak the things I know.^[22]

Smith went on to give examples of false statements and contradictions (listed above), insisted that at the time he and Blackburn had been genuine investigators with no thought of trying to deceive the SPR, and indignantly denied that he was an 'ingenious conjuror'. Finally, he challenged Blackburn to do what he said he had done: 'He has appealed to demonstration; let demonstration decide.' There was no response.

Why did Smith not bring an action for libel against Blackburn? One possible answer is that a lengthy court case with Blackburn at this time could have been prejudicial to his developing cinematic career.^[23]

Criticism and Controversy

The SPR's failure to publicly rebut Blackburn's accusations on their first airing in 1908 became a subject of subsequent controversy. Writing in the mid-twentieth century, Frasier Nicol pointed out that the organisation had good reason not to respond to the original charges made in *John Bull*, a popular weekly run by the notorious fraudster Horatio Bottomley, in order not to give them greater publicity. However, when in 1911 leading SPR figures rallied behind Smith, they still failed to provide a detailed forensic examination of Blackburn's case. Nicol has argued that this failure to adopt a more aggressive approach has given much ammunition to later critics of parapsychology, and indeed amounted to the most costly tactical error in its history to that time.^[24]

Understandably, sceptics motivated to neutralize any apparently positive evidence of psi have made much out of Blackburn's accusations, which they take at face value, apparently having not noticed – or preferring to disregard – the latter's weaknesses and inconsistencies.^{[25] [26]} A particularly elaborate use of the material was by Trevor Hall, a trenchant opponent of the SPR and of psychic claims, who used it as the basis for an imaginative thesis in which the death of Edmund Gurney from an overdose of chloroform – generally accepted by his contemporaries to have been an accident, since he frequently used chloroform to treat neuralgia (a common remedy at this time) – was converted to suicide, supposedly motivated by shame and despair at the realization that he had been duped by Smith and Blackburn.^[27] Hall's histrionic construction has been taken at face value in the wider intellectual community wherever parapsychology and psychical research are considered, and even by some psi researchers unacquainted with the full facts.^{[28] [29] [30]} The result has been to propagate the erroneous view that the SPR's early belief in the reality of telepathy rested largely on the Smith-Blackburn experiments, and these having been discredited – along with the SPR's experiments with the Creery children – the case for telepathy itself founders.^[31]

By 1911, 28 years after the founding of the SPR, its leaders were able to state authoritatively that their confidence of the reality of psychic phenomena was founded on a great variety of experiments, surveys and investigations and in no way rested on the findings of the Smith Blackburn experiments alone.^[32] By now, it cannot be maintained that they materially add to the scientific case for psi.^[33] However, the historical significance of the affair has been considerable, with regard to its disproportionately negative effect on the Society's reputation, and on the status of parapsychology in the wider academic community.

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Literature

The most searching examination of the Smith-Blackburn affair is found in Ruffles, T.(2011). *George Albert Smith (1864-1959): From Stage to Screen*. Unpublished PhD thesis. Anglia Polytechnic University. Grateful thanks are due to Tom Ruffles for permission to quote from an unedited version of that thesis and to make use of his highly detailed and well-

balanced research.

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Footnotes

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- 6.^ Blackburn, D. (1884). *Thought-Reading, or Modern Mysteries Explained. Being Chapters on Thought-reading, Occultism, Mesmerism, &c. Forming a Key to the Psychological Puzzles of the Day* London: Field and Tuer. Discussed in Wiley, *Thought Reader Craze*, 120. The title is a classic case of Blackburn over-egging the pudding and trying to capture as wide a market as possible.
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- 8.^ Broad, C.D.(1938).Henry Sidgwick and psychical research.*Proceedings of the Society for Psychical Research* 45: 131-161. Nicol, *Silences of Hall*, has summarized these experiments clearly and stated why they were impressive, 45-52. However, Dingwall, E. J.(1968).Ed. *Abnormal Hypnotic Phenomena. A Survey of Nineteenth Century Cases*. Vol.IV..New York: Barnes and Noble, has powerfully argued that Smith's show business background and Blackburn's 'confession' must cast very real doubt on all experiments in which Smith was either agent, percipient and/or hypnotist, 153-58.
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- 10.^ James, W. Review of "The Second Report of Experimental Psychology," by Charles Sedgwick Minot(1889) in James, W. (1986). *Essays in Psychical Research*. Eds. Burkhard, F.W.,Bowers, F.,and Skrupskelis, I.K. Harvard: Harvard University Press, 33-36.
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- 14.^ Blackburn, Douglas, *et al.* Confessions of a 'Telepathist', *Journal of the Society for Psychical Research* 15, 1911, pp. 115.
- 15.^ Ruffles, T. *George Albert Smith*, 81, 104, 106, 107-08.
- 16.^ Broad, C.D. Papers. Wren Library, Trinity College, Cambridge: The Life and Work of Edmund Gurney, D/1/17/246-322.
- 17.^ Gray, *Douglas Blackburn*, 6-10. Notice that Gray follows the conventional 'Hall' thesis on Blackburn's duplicity and Gurney's death: '...voluminous evidence is available as to how he fooled some of the leading scientific and metaphysical researchers of the day, driving one of them, Edmund Gurney, to an ignominious suicide..'
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