

# Table-Turning

'Table-turning' (also 'table-tipping', table levitation') refers to the anomalous movement of tables and other furniture, one of several séance effects widely-experienced throughout the developed world from the middle of the nineteenth century. The phenomenon is thought to occur from the psychic energy of a group, not necessarily with a medium present, although it has also been widely regarded as a medium of spirit communication. An alternative explanation is that the movement is caused by unconscious pressure exerted on the surface by the participants' hands. However, strong movements and levitations have also been noted to occur in the absence of any physical contact.

## Early History

The second century writer Tertullian spoke of pagans conjuring up spirits that communicated through the movement of stools and tables. A seventeenth century writer spoke of a Jewish sect that used tables for divining: '...the table springs up, even when laden with many hundred-weight'.<sup>[1]</sup>

The phenomenon appeared in earnest with the emergence of Spiritualism, beginning with poltergeist activity in the house of the Fox family in Hydesville, New York in 1848. An early incident was recorded by Rev C Hammond during a visit to the Foxes in 1850:

On taking our positions [around the table] the sounds were heard, and continued to multiply and became more violent, until every part of the room trembled with their demonstrations ... Suddenly, as we were all resting on the table, I felt the side next to me move upward—I pressed upon it heavily, but soon it passed out of the reach of us all—full six feet from me, and at least four from the nearest person to it. I saw distinctly its position—not a thread could have connected it with any of the company without my notice... In this position it was situated when the question was asked, 'Will the spirit move the table back where it was before?' And back it came as though it was carried on the head of someone...<sup>[2]</sup>

Although many believed the movements to be genuine spirit contacts, the Church regarded it as demonic<sup>[3]</sup>. A Rev NS Godfrey claimed that in a 1853 session to have extracted an admission from the table that it was moved by 'diabolic agency', and that all movement ended when he produced a Bible.<sup>[4]</sup> He said that other séances received information from lost souls sent from Hell and information that the Pope was the true head of the Church and that people should pray to the Virgin Mary.<sup>[5]</sup>

Many scientists and academics were dismissive of the practices, believing them to be either fraudulent or the result of poor observation. A few believed that a hitherto unknown source of energy might be responsible, for instance the 'Odic' force<sup>[6]</sup> claimed to exist by Baron Karl von Reichenbach: these included the Scottish-born American Robert Dale Owen and Charles Koch.<sup>[7]</sup>

## Nineteenth Century

In the early 1850s, a craze for table turning swept America and in 1852, two American mediums, Mrs Hayden and Mrs Roberts, arrived in England; Roberts advertised on the front page of *The Times*: 'Spiritual Manifestations and Communications from Departed Friends'. Within a year it had become fashionable throughout the country to hold 'tea and table-turning' parties, in which the anomalous movement of other items of furniture was often witnessed.<sup>[8]</sup> Queen Victoria and Prince Albert held sittings as 'parlour amusement'<sup>[9]</sup>.

As public enthusiasm grew, scientists decided to study the phenomena in greater detail. In June 1853, a *conversazione* was held in the Manchester Athenaeum to investigate table turning; however, this produced no phenomena. The eminent physicist Michael Faraday was urged to investigate the phenomenon, and reluctantly consented, speculating that the force that caused the movements was an involuntary and unconscious muscle contraction on the part of sitters. Faraday published the results of his experiment in *The Times* of June 30 1853, in which he said he had obtained the help of 'very honourable and successful table-movers' and observed the table move. He discounted the possibility that this was caused by electricity or magnetism, and to test his hypothesis of involuntary muscle movements devised an apparatus that would record these, made from cardboard sheets and an attached pencil. He stated:

It was easy to see by displacement of the parts of the line that the hand had moved further from the table, and that the latter had lagged behind – that the hand, in fact, had pushed the upper card to the left and that the under cards and the table had followed and been dragged by it.<sup>[10]</sup>

Faraday's verdict has shaped much modern thinking about the phenomenon, but was contested by spiritualists and some investigators, who pointed out that his explanation could not apply in instances when tables levitated without human touch. In Valleyres, Switzerland, in 1853, Count Agenor de Gasparin reported the anomalous movement of heavy tables without physical contact: even after buckets of sand and heavy stones were added to the table it lifted several times before breaking apart.<sup>[11]</sup> Gasparin's friend Marc Thury, professor of physics at the University of Geneva undertook his own study the following year, and reported that a piano moved by itself, apparently as a result of psychokinetic force supplied by a young boy in its proximity (the boy lacked the opportunity or physical strength to move it himself).

A boy was also the centre of a successful investigation undertaken by Robert Hare, a former professor of chemistry at the University of Pennsylvania. Having satisfied himself through the use of measuring apparatus that the child was not faking, in 1854 Hare arranged for him to be brought to a meeting in Montreal of the American Association for the Advancement of Science. However, the Association did not believe that the subject was worthy of its attention.<sup>[12]</sup>

In 1855, Eliab Wilkinson Capron, an early investigator of séance phenomena, wrote at length about table-turnings he witnessed in visible light:

[T]he table moved on the floor with nobody touching it – moved to the distance of a foot or more and back, in various directions. At our request, the table (which was a very light one) was held down on the floor so that it required the whole strength of a man to move it from its position. We also held one side and requested, if there was power to do it, that it would be drawn away from us; this was done, and our strength was not sufficient to hold it.<sup>[13]</sup>

In 1869, a major investigation of the phenomenon was undertaken by the London Dialectical Society, a rationalists debating club, which wished to discover the truth about claims of 'Spiritual Manifestations'. Thirty-three members were organised into six subcommittees, which included professional men and women, also some scientists, including the biologist Alfred Russel Wallace, a believer in spiritualist phenomena (the atheist scientist Thomas Huxley declined to join, stating that even 'supposing the phenomena to be genuine - they do not interest me'.<sup>[14]</sup>) The committees' reports were presented to the Council in 1870 and published the following year. They reported as follows:

1. That sounds of a very varied character, apparently proceeding from articles of furniture, the floor and wall of the room—the vibrations accompanying which sound are often distinctly perceptible to the touch—occur without being produced by muscular action or mechanical contrivance.
2. That movements of heavy bodies take place without mechanical contrivance of any kind or adequate exertion of muscular force by the persons present, and frequently without contact or connection with any person.
3. That these sounds and movements often occur at the times and in the manner asked for by persons present, and by means of a simple code of signals, answer questions and spell out coherent communications.
4. That the answers and communications thus obtained are, for the most part, of a commonplace character; but the facts are sometimes correctly given which are only known to one of the persons present.
5. That the circumstances under which the phenomena occur are variable, the most prominent fact being that the presence of certain persons seems necessary to their occurrence and that of others generally adverse; but this difference does not appear to depend upon any belief or disbelief concerning the phenomena.
6. That, nevertheless, the occurrence of the phenomena is not insured by the presence or absence of such persons respectively.<sup>[15]</sup>

Witness testimony provided precise information concerning the manifestations. Thirteen people stated that they had seen heavy bodies rise slowly in the air and remain there for some time without visible or tangible support. The committees concluded that 'the subject is worthy of more serious attention and careful investigation than it has hitherto received'.<sup>[16]</sup> Wallace later reported that during the inquiry at least twelve members who had been sceptical of the claims changed their minds.<sup>[17]</sup>

With the arrival of the psychic DD Home into social circles, the subject of table-turning began to receive greater attention from investigative science. In 1855, Home was said to have levitated a table big enough to seat fourteen people,<sup>[18]</sup> while on another occasion 'the table began to make strange undulatory movements, and gave out, as these proceeded, a curious accompaniment of creaking sounds'.<sup>[19]</sup> In 1858, Home undertook sittings with a group of ten 'rationalists' in Amsterdam, held in a well-lit room that he had not previously visited. It was recorded that he 'was able to bring about the levitation of a heavy mahogany table, despite the effort of several sitters who tried to prevent it rising.'<sup>[20]</sup> Home was investigated by the

scientist William Crookes, who reported, 'The table began to tilt, sometimes on one leg, sometimes on two; rising up opposite each person present in succession'. Eventually the table 'rose completely off the ground, several times', while the gentlemen present examined it, to ensure Home's feet and knees were not responsible, 'until each observer present expressed himself satisfied that the levitation was not produced by mechanical means on the part of the medium or anyone else present'.<sup>[21]</sup>

Crookes said he also witnessed table levitation through the mediumship of Florence Cook. Testimony regarding Home's ability to levitate furniture continued to appear, including a description by William Stainton Moses of a sitting in 1872, when chairs were moved and a table levitated.<sup>[22]</sup>

## 1900 to the Present.

A less well-known levitator, at least in Europe, was the Icelandic physical medium Indridi Indridason (1883-1912). In a 1905 sitting, a table was reported to have levitated to the eye-level of the people standing around it.<sup>[23]</sup> Indridason was investigated thoroughly by Gudmundur Hannesson, professor of medicine at the University of Iceland from 1908-09 who concluded that '...things move often, if not always, in an altogether unaccountable manner, without anybody either directly or indirectly causing their movements by ordinary means'.<sup>[24]</sup>

The Italian medium Eusapia Palladino, widely investigated by European scientists, was said to be a prolific producer of table levitations, as well as of stools and other furniture. More controversial than most, Palladino was known to try to cheat when poorly controlled. However, investigators reported that the levitations often took place beyond her reach, and that close examination showed no signs of threads or other covert attachments. Scientific observers who endorsed these feats, at least in part, included Oliver Lodge, Frederick Myers, Julian Ochorowicz and Charles Richet. An 1895 investigation by the SPR failed, but a later, more thorough investigation by SPR investigators, carried out in Naples in 1909, reported some 470 occurrences tending to reinforce the view that many of her powers were genuine.<sup>[25]</sup> On one occasion, an investigator and an invited observer lay on the floor, one either side of the table at which the medium was seated, and held her feet, whilst her hands were held by observers sitting at the table. This did not prevent both partial and complete levitations of the table.<sup>[26]</sup>

Between 1914 and 1920, an important study of a small family mediumistic circle was undertaken by the lecturer in mechanical engineering at Queen's University and Technical College, Belfast, William Jackson Crawford. The manifestations seemed to focus on the eldest daughter Kathleen Goligher, a girl of about seventeen years. Crawford devised equipment that allowed him to study the phenomena to eliminate fraud and try to understand what exactly was happening when the frequent levitations occurred.<sup>[27]</sup> <sup>[28]</sup> He invited other scientists to witness the activity, including the physicist William Barrett, who reported to the SPR as follows:

Then the table began to rise from the floor, until it reached a height of some of some twelve or eighteen inches, and remained thus suspended and quite level. We were allowed ... 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 riveted, and we 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.<sup>[29]</sup>

In the 1920s, the psychical investigator Harry Price undertook experiments with table-turners who included the mediums Stella Cranshaw and Rudi Schneider,<sup>[30]</sup> using sensitive equipment. Amateur circles continued to produce evidence of the phenomenon, such as the Bindelof group in America<sup>[31]</sup> and the Ingeborg Dahl Case from Norway.<sup>[32]</sup> As late as 1928, the president of the SPR, Lawrence Jones, considered the phenomenon important enough to mention it in his annual address.<sup>[33]</sup>

Table-turning activity continued in the following decades, such as the experiments carried out by the *Grupo La Plata* (La Plata Group), between the years 1950 and 1955, formed by José Maria Feola and other young intellectuals. In 1964, a major study was begun by Kenneth J Batchelder, a British clinical psychologist, who embarked on a series of informal table-turning experiments with three friends. Batchelder soon established that Faraday's theory of unconscious muscular action did not explain all the table's movements, which included levitation. Regular sittings held over a period of two years appeared to indicate that the phenomenon, although genuine, was not essentially of a 'spiritualist' nature, but more of a

psychological skill, requiring a positive approach and a lack of inhibition. Accordingly, he offered detailed practical advice about how to achieve the best results.<sup>[34]</sup>

In 1968, the electrical engineer Colin Brookes-Smith started a series of experiments along the same lines as Batcheldor's, but with the use of more sophisticated electronic equipment; these continued into the 1970s. His results similarly indicated that paranormal table levitation actually occurred and could be recorded scientifically:

These movements were produced at early stages in successive sessions and included the rising of the table some five or six feet clear of the floor, its movement over the whole of the room whilst in the air, and a peculiar oscillating descent to the floor . . . sometimes quite gently and sometimes very violently. During all of the movements the experimenters as far as possible maintained a light one-finger contact with the table, but this was unavoidably lost on occasion and many movements were possibly made without contact.<sup>[35]</sup>

## **SPR Research**

Anecdotal reports of the period include those of table levitations by Rosalind Heywood reported in 1960's the SPR literature.

Benson Herbert, head of the Paraphysical Laboratory in Downton, Wiltshire, was involved in a set of experiments in Richmond, near London with SPR investigators: Manfred Cassirer, RG Medhurst, John Stiles and Mary Rose Barrington. After an initial period of no activity the table started to make violent movements and rapped out messages.<sup>[36]</sup>

The 'Correspondence' section of the *Journal of the Society for Psychical Research* recorded in March 1967 that an intelligent lady had written to the SPR concerning the levitation of a table in good light and in the company of trusted friends which stayed several inches above the floor before returning there after a few seconds. The SPR was involved in other cases which were investigated by Brian C Nisbet.<sup>[37]</sup>

## **The 'Philip' Experiments**

In 1972, a new method of investigation was instigated by the Toronto Society for Psychical Research under the leadership of George and Ira Owen. They invented a character – called 'Philip' – whom they hoped they would be able to make contact with. Having achieved no success over the course of a year, the Owens encountered Batcheldor's work and decided to see if communications purporting to come from 'Philip' might ensue if they engaged in table-turning sessions similar to his. The sessions took place in full light and were recorded by video. The table produced raps and unusual movement that was not caused by the participants. Strain gauges showed that upward pressure was exerted by the table at times nobody's fingers were underneath it. At times the table tilted at a sharp angle, and so forcefully that even a person sitting on it could not force it down. No full levitation without physical contact was achieved, however the group was certain that the effect was anomalous, and could not be accounted for by muscular pressure.<sup>[38]</sup>

## **The Scole Circle**

Table movements and levitations were among many manifestations reported at séances held by a spiritualist circle at Scole in Norfolk. However, the sessions were held in total darkness, and the group's refusal to allow video filming meant the claims could not be verified.<sup>[39]</sup>

## **Felix Experimental Group**

American philosopher Stephen Braude describes encountering table-turning with friends as a student, and finding it to be a genuine phenomenon.<sup>[40]</sup> From 2012, he investigated the 'Felix Experimental Group' a German group who produced table levitations under observation, that were also filmed on video. Braude pointed out that not all the hands of the participants could be seen by the video footage, but stated that he was free to observe the table and the sitters during the manifestations at close quarters.<sup>[41]</sup>

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