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THE WRONG FOX SISTER?

[*Psypioneer* readers may like to consider the familiar image ‘photograph’ to the right and the 1888 report in *The Medium and Daybreak* and its accompanying image, presented below., Ed.]

THE adjoining group representing the celebrated “Fox Girls,” the mediums through whom Modern Spiritualism took its rise, was etched from a daguerreotype—one of the earliest forms of photography¹—kindly lent to us by Professor L. N. Fowler, the well-known Phrenologist. While the writer was associated with Mr. Fowler, about 25 years ago, Mrs. Fowler kindly lent it to have a negative taken, and after such a long lapse of time, it is gratifying to be able to place such an “antiquity” in the present issue of the *MEDIUM*.² We have never heard of another copy of this photographic group, nor have we heard spiritualists say they had seen one. No doubt various copies were taken but being on glass

they would necessarily be very limited in number. It is a difficult picture to copy by any process; but such as it is, it gives a most faithful likeness of these mediums when they were quite young, and their temperament and natural character can be studied more successfully from it, than the flattered products of the artist’s hand. We congratulate our readers on being presented with something of interest, which no one possesses but themselves.

James Burns.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Daguerreotype>

<sup>2</sup> *The Medium and Daybreak* No. 951.—Vol. XIX London, June 22, 1888 price 1½d. Front page. See *Fox News - Psypioneer* Volume 5, No.9 page 283: - <http://woodlandway.org/PDF/PP5.9September09..pdf>

## Paul Gaunt comments:

What caught my eye was the question mark on the etching; Leah or Lizzie?

By comparison, the similar *familiar image* ‘photograph’ of the three sisters (L-R Margaret, Kate & Ann (Leah), has been reproduced in many books and journals. And it is claimed by most as probably the earliest photograph taken of them. Mariam Bucker Pond<sup>3</sup> asserts this picture was taken in New York in 1852, from a daguerreotype made in Rochester. It is stated also by others that it’s a lithograph<sup>4</sup> by Currier & Ives 1850c.

### What if the ‘third sister’ image is in fact Lizzie?

The etching was published in the *Medium* just a few months prior to the 1888 Fox confessions. It is a little surprising why there would have been some doubt as to the identity of either mother or daughter on the photographic image. Anne Leah’s daughter, Elizabeth ‘Lizzie’ Fish was born sometime between; 1827-1830.<sup>5</sup> Maybe the *familiar image* ‘photograph’ I have published was only known in America, giving some difficulty in distinguishing the younger Leah or Lizzie. Or does it simply suggest that Maggie and Kate were close to their niece Lizzie, so the photograph could easily have been just a family photograph/daguerreotype rather than portraits of the famous Rochester Rappers?

### But why could it be suggested it may be Lizzie?

Was it a commemorative image! Were all three ladies, that is, Maggie, Kate and Lizzie all at the Hydesville house at the time of the alleged peddler haunting?

In Fox News<sup>6</sup> I remarked: “.....Mrs. Fox stated in her original Lewis statement:—“*There was four of our family, and sometimes five*”—it is likely that Mrs. Fox was referring to Leah’s daughter Lizzie.” I have privately noted over the years that a few old reports do put Lizzie at Hydesville at March 31<sup>st</sup> 1848; this I have always regarded as a possible error.

While at Stansted Hall, during my recent research visit, I found in addition to the daguerreotype etching presented to readers by James Burns, another relevant item also reported in the *Medium and Daybreak*.<sup>7</sup> If correct, the history of Hydesville as we know it would change significantly:

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<sup>3</sup> The Unwilling Martyrs: The Story of the Fox Family, by Mariam Buckner Pond Spiritualist Press Ltd, London E.C.4. 1947. The author married a grand-nephew of the Fox sisters, the grandson of their brother David.

<sup>4</sup> <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lithography>

<sup>5</sup> *Talking to the Dead* - by Barbara Weisberg, HarperSanFrancisco 2004 page 35.

<sup>6</sup> Fox News – See *Psypioneer* Volume 5, No.9 page 283: -  
<http://woodlandway.org/PDF/PP5.9September09..pdf>

<sup>7</sup> *The Medium and Daybreak*, May 3, 1878 page 281

# MARGARET AND KATE FOX

At the thirtieth Anniversary Meeting, held at Grafton Hall on the 17th of April last, under the presidency of Mr. Enmore Jones, several interesting facts were mentioned in connection with the two Fox sisters, now Mrs. Kane and Mrs. Jencken, and better known as Margaret and Kate Fox. Both these ladies were on the platform, and, strange enough to say, for the first time (that is together) since Spiritualism had its inception at Hydesville, near Rochester, in the year 1848. At that period the two young mediums were aged four and six years, and not nine and eleven years, as usually reported in the Spiritualist papers. The true ascertainment of this fact is so far of interest, as some controversy has been going on from time to time as to the possibility of these two children answering and carrying out a systematic deception.

Maggie and Kate, as named, were only four and six years old respectively on the 31st March, 1848, and at that time resided with their parents in a small wooden house temporarily occupied by the Fox family until the dwelling on the old family estate of Mrs. Fox's father had been completed. A granddaughter of Mrs. Fox (Elizabeth Fish, aged eleven years) was at that time staying with the grandparents. This older niece was the questioner with whom the early conversations were carried on with the unseen communicants, little Katie merely responding by clasping her tiny fingers together.

The error of the ages of these children arose no doubt by confounding the age of the niece, Elizabeth Fish, with that of either Maggie or Katie.

Two or three years after the first happening of the phenomena Katie Fox was taken charge of by the Hon. Horace Greeley, the well-known editor of the *New York Tribune*, and conveyed to his residence in New York.

For further evidence of the early age of this child a few words from a letter of Mrs. Greeley may be given. She says, in alluding to these manifestations: "I have had communications when little Cathie (Katie) Fox has been fast asleep in my arms. I have had beautiful poetry through her when she was living with me."

It must be borne in mind that the child Katie Fox was at that time too young to have conceived poetical thoughts, far less written them or spelt them out by the slow process of telegraphy by means of raps. All these facts will, however, it is understood, be before the public when Mrs. Kate Fox Jencken publishes her "Autobiography," now all but completed, containing her experiences of Spiritualism from the days of the Rochester rappings to the present time.

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The implications of this statement are obviously far reaching; but is it correct? If or not Lizzie was at home in Rochester with her mother Leah, or at Hydesville with her grandparents at the time in question is a matter of conjecture. For example Leah makes no reference to taking her daughter to Hydesville when she first heard about the haunting, but does make reference to bringing her back home to Rochester with Kate:

“I with the ladies who accompanied me remained about two weeks, when we concluded to take Katie and Lizzie (my daughter) with us and return home to Rochester.....”⁸

The date of Lizzie’s birth I referenced above would make her around 18-21 years of age in 1848; in the above article it is stated she was aged 11. The ages of all the Fox girls have been an issue over the years in *Psypioneer*. In September 2008 Lis Warwood examined the confusing question of their ages see: - *The Fox Sisters: Riddle of the records*.⁹ Although she was unable to establish beyond doubt their actual ages, it is the most thorough research known to date. It did show that they all lied at different times in their lives about their ages!

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In *Psypioneer* September 2005,<sup>10</sup> we asked: - *What Happened to the Autobiography by Kate Fox Jencken?*

MRS. HENRY D. JENCKEN (Kate Fox), is about to publish her autobiography, containing remarkable experiences of Spiritual phenomena from the commencement of the movement of modern Spiritualism, thirty years ago, to the present time’.

As we noted, then in *Psypioneer*, as far as we know, the book was never published. And, we might add now, the whereabouts of the manuscript never ascertained.

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<sup>8</sup> *The Missing Link in Modern Spiritualism* - by, A. Leah Underhill. Thomas R. Knox New York 1885, page 32

<sup>9</sup> *The Fox Sisters: Riddle of the records* - Lis J. Warwood – See *Psypioneer* Volume 4, No.9 page 186: - <http://www.woodlandway.org/PDF/PP4.9September08..pdf>

<sup>10</sup> *What Happened to the Autobiography by Kate Fox Jencken?* - See *Psypioneer* Volume 1, No.17 page 208: - <http://woodlandway.org/PDF/17.PSYPIONEERFoundedbyLesliePrice.pdf>

# Ada Maud Besinnet Roche

1890 – 1936

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The Implications of Ada

by

Leslie Price and Paul J. Gaunt



In 1921, Spiritualists in Scotland enjoyed the mediumship of an American visitor, (whose name was more commonly spelt Besinnet).

Below is taken from *The Two Worlds* - October 7, 1921 p 471- 472:—

Miss Ada Bessinett at Glasgow

AT the close of Mr. Horace Leaf's evening lecture to the Glasgow Association on Sunday, September 25th, Mr. McIndoe made public acknowledgement of the work done for the Association by Miss Bessinett. He said:

No more uniformly successful and satisfactory series of seances has ever been held under our auspices. From first to last the results have been most gratifying, I have heard no complaints except from those whom we could not admit to the sittings, and our one regret is that the visit has been all too short.

On behalf of our executive, our Association, and especially on behalf of those who had the privilege of sitting with her, I offer her our sincere and grateful thanks. It may not be out of place to refer briefly to the sittings. Each seance has commenced with a display of physical phenomena which was apparently granted us by the spirit helpers as evidence of the reality of their presence and their ability to do things, even when hampered by restrictions which they themselves imposed or accepted, the recital of which would be received with incredulity in any but an audience of Spiritualists.

The gramophone took the place of the singing which we usually have at seances, and at every seance spirit hands took part in its manipulation. They have started it, stopped it, changed the records, changed the needles, done everything but wind it up, and to the accompaniment of these records we have had the tambourine played all round the circle in

perfect time, and the player has frequently shown herself as a beautiful Spanish girl. We have had singing in childish treble, high and loud. soprano, contralto, tenor and baritone voices; whistling of such loudness and volume, and sustained for such long periods without a pause for breath, as to suggest that it could not be emanating from anyone using ordinary breathing organs. All these things have happened in the dark with the medium sitting free in her chair, apparently in trance, but they have also occurred with the medium bound in her chair, the ropes passed round her body and through the back of the chair then tightly round her right arm, and to make assurance doubly sure, also fastened round the left arm of the man sitting next her, and the two together bound to the arm of the chair.

Around her mouth a handkerchief has been tightly tied, and all this has been done by the spirit people. We have turned on the red light and examined closely the tying, and found it systematically and thoroughly done. In the dark these phenomena have been repeated apparently with the same freedom, and we have again turned on the light and found the tying intact.

Of course, some of our credulous critics will suggest that Mrs. McKenzie was the author of these phenomena, there are three conclusive answers to this. The first that she and Miss Bessinett were so seated in the room between the wall and the table that neither could have moved from her seat without instant detection; the second is that Mrs. McKenzie's hands were frequently being held by some of the sitters while these things were happening; and the third is that the phenomena occurred just the same when Mrs. McKenzie was not present, when her place at the gramophone had been taken by Mr. Garscadden or myself.

Now, while I should not like to fix a limit to the possible accomplishments of Mrs. McKenzie, it will be obvious to all who know us that neither Mr. Garscadden nor I could possibly masquerade as beautiful Spanish girls, dancing with tambourines, without instant discovery.

But these things prove nothing but the operation of some supernormal forces acting under intelligent guidance and control, they do not prove that personality and consciousness survive beyond the grave, and as that is the work which Miss Bessinett and her helpers wish to assist in accomplishing, these phenomena were the prelude to the manifestations which followed, when such evidence of the survival of consciousness and identity were offered as to leave no room for doubt in the minds of those who received it.

And so we have in our midst, and there are scattered throughout the length and breadth of the land, from far Aberdeen to Edinburgh, and from Edinburgh to Belfast, a goodly quota who, as the result of their sitting with Miss Bessinett in Glasgow, have been added to the number of those in our ranks who can say with quiet emphasis and with calm conviction, "We know, for we have seen, we have felt, we have heard."

We have seen the faces of our departed friends as the veil was drawn aside for a few brief moments. Some of them have smiled on us, and very many of us have recognised them without any shadow of a doubt as to their identity. Our own convictions have been reinforced as we heard the joyful and confident tones of recognition with which those who stood beside us welcomed the forms who manifested for them—husbands greeted their wives, parents

their children, friends and relations greeted one another. We have felt as well as seen, Felt the touch of their fingers upon ours, the pressure of their hands upon our heads and shoulders, the caress of their fingers upon our faces. We have heard as well as seen and felt. Heard them call to us out of the darkness, some of us familiarly by name. We have answered, and they have responded with words of loving cheer and encouragement, and they have bidden us become their messengers and take tidings to their friends of their continued existence, their enduring love, and the interest and care which they still maintain for their welfare.

They have also left behind more tangible evidence of their presence and identity in the shape of written communications which, by their purport and contents, tended to establish the identity of the sender, and that they were intended for the recipient in whose hands they were placed, and for none other.

So we say we know, and though the whole world should rise in derision and shout that such things are not, have not been, and never can be, it will make not one whit of difference to our conviction, for we have had these experiences, and until time for us has ceased to be, they will remain with us a precious and an indelible memory.

For the privilege of being in a position to make such a declaration, we offer our thanks to Miss Bessinett, thanks we cannot adequately express in words. We wish her God speed in her work, health, strength and continued opportunity to pursue it, and when next she returns to this country or wherever she may go, she will nowhere find a more hearty welcome than that which most assuredly awaits her when newt she sets foot in Glasgow.

Mrs. B. McKenzie, of the British College of Psychic Science, London, who occupied the chair, replied on behalf of Miss Bessinet, referring to her development in the home circle under the watchful care of her foster mother, and spoke to the very valuable work she had been doing in London. She emphasised the need for guarding and protecting our mediums, and spoke also of the great dearth of capable exponents to follow up the work of such demonstrators as Miss Bessinett.

However, behind the scenes at BCPS¹¹ in London, there was a different picture, which was discussed in Muriel Hankey's biography "James Hewat McKenzie Pioneer of Psychical Research":—¹²

METHODS OF INVESTIGATION

One of the earliest examinations of physical mediumship conducted by McKenzie after the establishment of his College, with the co-operation of the research committee, was with Miss Ada Besinnet, of Toledo, Ohio, during a period of six months from May to November 1921.

Miss Besinnet was a delightful woman, with whom Professor Hyslop had carried out about seventy test sittings some twelve years previously. He then referred to her mediumship as "a case of hysteria". With this Mr. McKenzie disagreed. "The conclusions I have arrived at from a series of experiments—as careful and as complete as were those conducted by Professor Hyslop—go to show that those actions of the medium which the Professor attributed to hysteria may be fully accounted for as due to the action of controlling spirits. This difference of view may arise from the fact that the medium in 1909 was probably less developed than at the present moment, and that Professor Hyslop had at the time a very limited experience of *physical* phenomena produced through mediumship, most of his attention having been devoted to the study of mental mediumship, he being not fully cognisant of the psychic mechanism used by unseen intelligences acting on physical matter, et cetera."¹³

Miss Besinnet's phenomena were varied. The seances were divided roughly into three parts. First, direct voice, singing, whistling (all of exceptional quality), tambourine playing and the appearance of moving lights. Professor Hyslop himself testified that Miss Besinnet did not sing, play or whistle in her normal condition, and the fact that she could do so in a state of trance probably contributed to his theory of hysteria. If he was right in this diagnosis, then many professional "singers" today would benefit themselves and their public if they would acquire a dose of such hysteria. The second part of the Besinnet sittings was devoted to the presentation of faces illuminated by a bright light held in her left hand. The third portion was given to the production of voices in the trumpet, and in writing on pads which had been placed for that purpose on the table. There were various "controls", five who appeared regularly, but McKenzie was not concerned whether they were really spirits or only secondary personalities built up by the subconscious mind of the medium. His examination was concentrated on obtaining evidence as to whether Miss Besinnet's mediumship could or could not produce physical phenomena by supernatural means.

¹¹ James Hewat McKenzie established in April 1920, the 'British. College of Psychic Science' (BCPS) at 59 Holland Park, London.

¹² *J. Hewat McKenzie Pioneer of Psychical Research* by Muriel Hankey The Aquarian Press, London 1963. Chapter 8—Methods of Investigation, pages 78-81 quoted.

¹³ *Psychic Science*, Vol. 1, No. 1, p. 20

McKenzie made positive assertions of several paranormal effects, such as floating lights revolving round the medium even when both her hands were held, and these lights made no impression on an exposed photographic plate on which they rested; also he made assertions about “direct” voices when the trumpet was held in the hands of a sitter, and whistling whilst McKenzie’s ear was against the mouth of the medium. Nevertheless, the verdict was by no means one hundred per cent in favour of the medium. The summing-up claimed that eight of the manifestations were genuine phenomena, four types were doubtful and two were artificial. This word *artificial* is particularly useful in bridging the gulf of doubt between genuine and fraudulent demonstrations, for much that is doubtful may be due to psychological or other causes and not to deliberate cheating.

Miss Besinnet was abnormally sensitive to light, as is evidenced by several recorded occurrences which had actual deleterious effects upon her physique. For an instance of this sensitivity a tiny spot of luminous paint was put on the back of her séance-room gown, unknown to the medium, but she was totally unable to go into trance. At the next sitting, the spot having been removed, there was no difficulty at all. Professor Hyslop had found this same super-sensitivity to light with this medium.

Mr. McKenzie’s report of this investigation, with his ultimate conclusions, contained in Vol. I, No. I of *The Journal of Psychic Science* (the Quarterly Transactions of the B.C.P.S.) is well worth reading and studying, as also are some of the later records of work with other mediums. He was much criticised by Conan Doyle for his adverse report on A.B. All such reports will find their detractors, no doubt; it is always easy to spot weaknesses and say what might, could, or should have been done in certain circumstances, but McKenzie did not necessarily disclose in print every detail of his methods or the reasons thereof.

The apparatus used at these test seances must sound elementary to the modern researcher, but even though simple it was efficacious when under direction by McKenzie, and people trained by him, such as Major Charles Mowbray, who was for a time Research Officer of the B.C.P.S.

The largest seance room at the College was sparsely furnished, and kept solely for physical mediumship. It had the usual “cabinet” which was sited in the centre of a long wall, and consisted merely of two pillars placed a few feet out from the wall, with a curtain rail from wall to pillars, and across the front; no trap-doors or sliding panels; the curtains and rails, and, indeed, the whole room, could be freely examined by the sitters. The medium was not always seated in the cabinet, or, if in it, the curtains were often drawn back, leaving the medium in full view. This placing of the medium depended upon the type of phenomena expected to be produced. The reports show that both Miss Besinnet and Frau Silbert sat at the heavy dining-table, with the observers also seated, and, in Fran Silbert’s case, actually touching her.

As many of these seances are on record, it is not necessary here to recapitulate the phenomena, but merely to mention some of the controls imposed as an interesting comparison with the scientific methods employed by parapsychologists today.

The lighting of the seance room consisted of a centre pendant of four lights, with a fifth bulb hanging below which was red in colour; other lights and rheostats were installed at key points, and controlled by the responsible officers. Members of the circles maintained hand contact with their neighbours. There was no need for them to connive at making individual tests because they had all been taken into McKenzie's confidence, and had all discussed and agreed on the conditions to be imposed. Measurements were noted, and phenomena timed and recorded as they occurred.

Matters became graver, as can be seen from a later passage in Mrs Hankey's memoir. (p.142-4), part of the "Collation of Opinion and Remembrance":—

HORACE LEAF, F.R.G.S.

Medium, lecturer, teacher, traveller, author.

I knew James Hewat McKenzie at the beginning of the twentieth century. At the time I was a member of a local debating society in Clapton, North London, at which, along with a number of other young men, philosophical, political, social, religious and scientific subjects were discussed, and Mr. McKenzie showed some interest. I did not then know he was a Spiritualist.

At this time he won some local renown as an astute businessman, having purchased the old tram depot in Clapton, after the introduction of electric trams. It was then that I learned of his foresight in the future of motoring as one of his aims, afterwards fulfilled, was to establish garages in suitable places in the metropolis. When I became a Spiritualist and medium, his interest in me naturally increased, and he and his wife would discuss with me various psychic problems. I was surprised to learn from him that at one time he had been a successful healer, using the mesmeric passes system.

Mr. McKenzie and his wife were both very modest people with keen democratic viewpoints and absolutely no "side". His success in business in no way altered his complete friendliness, and he retained this delightful characteristic all his life. Soon after establishing the British College of Psychic Science, in Holland Park, he invited me to become staff lecturer on psychology and development of mediumship. Out of that developed my book, *The Psychology and Development of Mediumship*, Mr. McKenzie writing the foreword.

Having taken part in several of the various kinds of séances over which Mr. McKenzie, as College President, presided, I was able to form an opinion of his qualifications as an investigator, and could find no fault with him and his methods. He visited several countries seeking suitable mediums, especially those with physical powers, and his choice was invariably good. He told me that he regarded John C. Sloan, the Glasgow physical medium, as about the best of them. Sloan's

drawback seems to have been his objection to receiving monetary rewards for his mediumistic work. This made him “a bit of a nuisance”, because, I suppose, one could not give him instructions.

Mr. McKenzie told me of an amusing and instructive conversation he had with Miss Ada M. Besinnet, a physical medium from Toledo, Ohio, U.S.A. This remarkable psychic produced different kinds of phenomena, including singing, whistling, direct voice, materialisations, *et cetera* all, as far as I witnessed, in Stygian darkness. Some doubt having been expressed by critics about her genuineness, McKenzie set up a secret apparatus by which he found that during some of the manifestations she was not, as she was supposed to be, in her chair. It was concluded that of the usual series of seven forms of phenomena which appeared to characterise her average seance, during three or four of them she was active in producing them. In a private interview he had with her, Mr. McKenzie informed her that she was obviously cheating. Quoting “freely”, the substance of the conversation took something of the following form:

Mr. McK: It is you, and not spirits, who produce these manifestations: In other words, you act fraudulently.

Miss B.: “Mr. McKenzie, if you repeat those words in the presence of others, or in writing, I will sue for defamation of character. State any time when I have said, either by word spoken or written, spirits produce my phenomena. I have never made that claim. During all the seance I am unconscious, and have no knowledge of what takes place. It is you who call me a medium and say that spirits produce the phenomena.”

Mr. McKenzie examined the correspondence, and recalled his conversations with her, and found she spoke the truth. Incidentally, I understand that Miss Besinnet never claimed to be a Spiritualist, any more than Mrs. Leonore Piper did. I knew Miss Besinnet fairly well, having met her in more than one country, and she impressed me as being one of the most intelligent women whom I met interested in supernormal phenomena. Personally I regard her as one of the most convincing of mediums, more because of her mental and physical condition after seances before she left her chair. I have untied her myself; but what was impressive, she would lie unconscious for some time, without a flicker of her eyelids, and her body as cold and inert as a corpse. The seance room was invariably warm. I think Mr. McKenzie took the same point of view.

There is no need to emphasise the sincerity of this Spiritualist, for Mr. McKenzie backed up his faith with work and money with a generosity that few if any other advocates of Spiritualism have done.

At least one other sitter contributing to the Collation had strong feelings. (Hankey p.138-9) This was Dr. Eric J. Dingwall, anthropologist and author, Noted researcher for over fifty years and former Research Officer of the Society for Psychical Research:—

I was personally acquainted with Mr. McKenzie for many years but never really succeeded in understanding him. He was a strange mixture, part business-man and part dreamer, and the combination of the two was responsible for the building up of his British College of Psychic Science, which opened on April 12, 1920, and where I was a frequent visitor. The problem before him was to present psychic phenomena to members of the College in such a way that it would grow into a flourishing institution and might eventually pay its own way. People wanted to see phenomena, to communicate with those they had lost, and so become convinced of survival. In three publications McKenzie showed them how to do it. He had not the slightest idea of the real meaning of scientific work, and possessed but little appreciation of what constitutes good evidence. The mediums who visited the College had to be paid, and the sitters had to pay to see them, so it was unlikely that McKenzie would be so strict against the mediums as to frighten them away, but he did endeavour to take such precautions as he himself thought adequate. His treatment of the spirit photographer, William Hope, was typical. Although it was strongly suspected that Hope never produced any genuine psychic effects. Mr. McKenzie defended him vehemently, and, when looking into Hope's bag, found apparatus for producing these frauds, published nothing about it, and the facts only emerged long afterwards.

My own break with him occurred during the visit of the famous American medium, Miss Ada Besinnet, who visited the College ostensibly as a physical medium of reputation. As a matter of fact, however, Miss Besinnet had already been the subject of a report in which it was strongly suggested that her phenomena were produced by herself in a state of mental dissociation, and it was my opinion at the time that this ought to have been fully explained to the sitters. Mr. McKenzie, I think, took my criticism as a personal affront to his own integrity and after a somewhat difficult interview we parted never to come together again in a spirit of mutual understanding.

Nevertheless I always liked McKenzie. He was full of enthusiasm, liked hard work and in many ways helped numbers of people to a better understanding of their own experiences. In spite of his massive credulity and disregard of scientific evidence he was a remarkable example of the spiritualist business-man; and it is better to remember him for his many good qualities than to stress his naive belief in Houdini's "psychic" powers and his stories of conversations with Shakespeare, Bacon and Euripides.

Another experienced investigator of physical phenomena also expressed his puzzlement. In *The Story of Psychic Science* - Hereward Carrington (Rider, 1930 p.141) wrote:—

PSYCHIC LIGHTS

In the presence of certain physical mediums, lights are not infrequently seen. These are sometimes only as large as big pin-heads; at other times, like small saucers. The smaller lights usually move about with considerable velocity, while the larger lights remain more nearly stationary. The former were frequently noted at the seances of Eusapia Palladino, while both these varieties—together with other puzzling luminous phenomena—were observed at the Margery sittings, on numerous occasions. They were also noted in the seances of William Stainton Moses, and many other mediums. In the seances of Frau Silbert, lightning—like flashes of great brilliance are occasionally seen. In Miss Ada Besinnet's sittings, a glow is observed over the centre of the seance table, which gradually increases in brilliance, and is seen to be illuminating a face, swathed in white material, which is 'materialized' over the table. This list might be extended to include similar manifestations witnessed in the presence of many other physical mediums.

In a series of sittings I obtained with Miss Ada Besinnet, in 1922, a number of curious lights were observed, floating about, over the seance table. Inasmuch as practically no control of the medium was allowed, however, these in themselves could not be considered evidential. But, at some of the later sittings, naked photographic plates were placed upon the table, in the dark, and the request was made that the light should hover over the plate for a few moments, when next it appeared. This was done, remaining visible for several seconds. The plate was then immediately packed away and developed by the investigators the next day. Upon several of these plates, curious light—effects were produced; and, without unduly stressing the question of their supernormality, it may be said that all attempts to duplicate them upon similar plates by means of draped flash-lights, phosphorescent substances, luminous paint, radium compounds, etc.—completely failed. I merely state the facts, without attempting to draw any conclusions regarding them.

In 1934 in *This World and Beyond*¹⁴ Mrs. Philip Champion De Crespigny expressed her support of Miss Besinnet. She was by then Hon Principal of BCPS:—

Owing to this dearth of physical mediumship, it was some little time after I came to live in London before I was brought into contact with any form of "materialization"—beyond what might be called the half-way house of the direct voice. My first experiences were with Miss Bessinet from America, when on a visit to the British College of Psychic Science in its old quarters in Holland Park. I was no longer looking for proof of survival, having obtained enough to satisfy me through the direct voice. My interest was centred in the

¹⁴ *This World—And Beyond* by Mrs. Philip Champion De Crespigny, Cassell & Co. Ltd 1934 pages 169-172.

problems presented by the scientific aspect of the subject, and the search for truth along any lines that offered.

Miss Bessinet's form of materialization was of an unusual kind. The séance which I first attended consisted of from ten to twelve persons, seated round a large table with the medium at one end. Mr. Hewat McKenzie, founder and Hon. Principal of the College at the time, sat on the medium's immediate left, and was in control of the gramophone. The séance was conducted in the dark. Sir Arthur and Lady Conan Doyle were present among the sitters.

The manifestation took the form of faces, illuminated by an attendant light which, with the face, remained poised in mid-air in front of the sitter for whom it was intended. The faces faded and reformed, as materialized objects will, a sort of ebb and flow of the power that keeps them in being.

The most interesting, because the most convincing point, from my own point of view, lay in the fact that the "materialized" faces were appreciably under normal size. Judged roughly, they were about three quarters as large as that of the ordinary adult. Miss Bessinet is not a small woman; she has a fine face and distinctive features, nor would it have been possible for her to present it to the sitters either from her chair, or standing at the end of the table at the particular angle at which each face did confront us. If masks at the end of a stick, as I have heard it suggested, should be the solution, how would they have been imported into the séance-room after the medium had been rigorously searched by expert investigators?

The faces were the colour of plaster, not so white or luminous as alabaster or marble, and beautifully moulded—*if* moulded they were—and in most instances definitely recognizable. The face that was shown to me was undoubtedly that of my mother. Sir Arthur also recognized his mother, pointing out, to Lady Doyle, the striking likeness and tracing the lines on her face in detail.

We were told that each sitter would be drawn to his or her feet for the personal demonstration. When my turn arrived I felt something that might have been the fingers of a hand take me by the collar of my coat, and I was lifted on to my feet by a force as inexorable and impossible to resist as the pull of a steam crane would have been, from directly above my head. It was not in the nature of the upward haul given by a man's arm; there was no give in it. The steady, inevitable force of a steam crane in action is the only thing to which I can compare it. To have attributed this phase of the phenomenon to action on the part of the medium would have been an absurdity. Miss Bessinet was seated at least two yards away from me, with two sitters between her and myself. Any upward pull on her part from such an angle would have had a forward or sideways inclination—if she could have reached me at all. The pull which drew me to my feet was from directly above, and the irresistible power of it inspired me with a lasting respect for the unknown forces with which we so light-heartedly tamper!

Subsequently there were doubts raised as to the genuineness of Miss Bessinet's mediumship, and far be it from me to step in where angels have not feared to tread!

But the doubts were based mainly on the fact that on one occasion after the séance, when the light was turned up, the medium was found to be standing on her feet instead of sitting on her chair. Now I have seen in good red light the throes and contortions into which a medium may be thrown before giving birth to ectoplasm, when it was evident that had she not been securely tied in the chair, she would have been ramping round the room. Therefore, in the case of Miss Bessinet, from my own personal point of view and in the light of my experience, my faith in the genuineness of her mediumship remained unshaken.

In 1936, the death of the medium permitted more candid discussions. *LIGHT* announced on April 9, 1936 p 231:—

MISS ADA BESSENETT PASSES ON

News comes from America of the passing of Miss Ada Bessenett, the materialising Medium. Miss Bessenett visited this country in 1921, under the auspices of the British College of Psychic Science, and gave a long series of sittings, which were very favourably described by Mr. Hewat McKenzie, in the first issue of *Psychic Science* (April 1922). She also gave sittings in Glasgow and Bournemouth. Miss Bessenett married Mr. Wm. Roche, a Toledo journalist, in 1931; he died in 1934.

This was too much for Dr Dingwall, who wrote in *LIGHT* April 23, 1936 p. 267, perhaps with characteristic mischievousness:—

ADA M. BESINNET

IT was with great regret that I heard of the death of Miss Besinnet, concerning whom you printed a note in the issue of *LIGHT* for April 9th, although, through an error, her name was wrongly spelt.

I knew Miss Besinnet well, and, knowing my rather doubtful nature, she was able to talk to me quite openly about her phenomena. It was after the scene at the British College for Psychic Science when one of her sittings was broken up with a torch, that Miss Besinnet determined never to visit England again. I am not sure whether she kept her resolution; but at

any rate she never forgave the outrage, since she could not understand that there were people who could be so ignorant of her history and her sittings.

Miss Besinnet was never a materialising Medium in the ordinarily accepted sense. Her “phenomena” were produced by herself in an amazingly skilful manner: the faces of the “materialised” forms were Miss Besinnet’s face; it was the sitter who built up in imagination the face of the departed.

I well remember after one of the sittings which I had with her in Toledo, Ohio, that we had a long, intimate talk until far into the night. “Were all the faces my face to-night?” she asked me. “Yes,” I replied, “every one.” Did I do it all as usual?” she continued. “I suppose so,” I said; “why do you ask that?” “Well,” she said, “because my position is so difficult.” “How do you mean?” I asked. “You see,” she went on, “of course you know the facts, and so did Professor Hyslop and so does Dr. Pyle, but the public won’t understand, and wouldn’t come if they did. I’m in trance. I think that the faces are mine and that I’m leaning right over the table, but my sitters see their own relations and friends—every line of their faces. What am I to do? I have my living to make.”

It was indeed a problem, and I hope I helped her to solve it. Certain of her phenomena seemed to imply prior preparation of materials. It was these which puzzled her friends most, for she had what always seemed to me to be an honest and open nature. Perhaps she combined her extraordinary faculties with something else. However that may be, she was one of the most remarkable Mediums of whom we have any record. I am glad to pay my tribute to her memory.

E. J. DINGWALL.

Predictably there was an angry reaction. Thus *LIGHT* reported on April 30, 1936 p. 279:—

A LETTER FROM THE OTHER SIDE

MISS BESINNET'S MEDIUMSHIP

MRS. MADGE DONOHOE writes expressing her astonishment at Mr. Dingwall's assertions concerning Miss Ada Besinnet's mediumship, and to show how greatly at variance with her experience is his statement that only one face—the Medium's—was seen at a Besinnet seance, she encloses the MS. of an account of one which will appear in a book she is just now writing on her skotographs. With her permission we append some extracts from it.

After describing a preliminary musical entertainment staged by Black Hawk, Miss Besinnet's control, "which would have done honour to any concert hall in the land," the story continues:

"The song ceased. A profound silence fell upon us. Mystic lights flashed hither and thither. Then they, too, were gone. There was nothing but darkness and stillness. The materialisations were about to begin.

"We had been told that anyone touched in a certain manner was to rise in his seat and, placing his hands on the table, lean forward as far as possible. I was the first to receive the signal. I stood up and bent forward as directed—and lo! the incredible had happened. I was looking into the faces of my two nephews, Egerton and Robert Clunies Ross.

"How long we remained thus gazing into each other's eyes I cannot say. In one way the time appeared of infinite duration: my commonsense tells me that it was probably less than a minute. Then they were gone, and I sank back in my chair. I think I must have lost consciousness, for I saw nothing of the materialisations which appeared to other sitters. Mine, being the first, had been seen by all, though not, perhaps, in as definite detail as by me."

"For me," writes Mrs. Donohoe in conclusion, "that Ada Besinnet seance was a milestone on the path leading to the goal I have now attained—the unshakeable conviction that we do survive bodily death, and that communication with the inhabitants of the etheric world is as natural and reasonable as with those of this one. My grateful thoughts will always go out to Ada Besinnet, Black Hawk and Pansy, and I thank God for them."

More witnesses testified on May 7, 1936 p. 294ff, and a fellow researcher supported Dr Dingwall:—

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

A SITTING WITH MISS BESINET

Sir,—In confirmation of the letter you published by Mrs. Madge Donohoe (*LIGHT*, April 30th), I should like to add my testimony as to the character of the seances given by Miss Ada Besinnet.

My sister and I sat with her at the British College of Psychic Science when she was in England some years ago. The first to appear was an old man, recognised by the sitter on my right as his father. Next came a girl much more naturally coloured. My sister and I simultaneously whispered to each other: “Maggie Hyde.” This girl was the niece and an occasional visitor of an old servant living with us. We knew her but slightly. She had died about five years before. Certainly she was one of the last persons we should have expected to see.

Next came our mother. Her face was almost too close to ours. We were on the side of the table opposite to the Medium. Our mother looked at us with an eager expression of keen anxiety to be recognised. An aunt also appeared.

These were all we got personally, but we saw the figures holding a light to their faces, who came for other sitters.

My mother spoke to me at some length through the trumpet before the end of the sitting on items of family matters, and sent messages to persons at home, by name.

A point I wish particularly to emphasise is that the figures appeared directly above the heavy mahogany table; ending in mist at about knee length, where the light was reflected in the polished surface. It is impossible that the figures could have been produced by the Medium leaning over the table—at least on the occasion when I was there.

I cannot do better than end with Mrs. Donohoe’s words: “My grateful thoughts will always go out to Ada Besinnet, Black Hawk, and Pansy, and I thank God for them.”

S. M. BOWLEY.

ANOTHER READER’S EXPERIENCE

Sir,—Concerning Dr. Dingwall’s article on Miss Besinnet (*LIGHT*, April 23rd), I had a sitting with Miss Besinnet at the British College for Psychic Science some 14 years ago, at which my late wife materialised to the extent of one-half of her face, which I recognised. She caressed my face with her hand, which was the same soft hand as she had on earth-life, and afterwards sent me a note that she had showed me part of her face. This is simpler to believe and receive than Dr. Dingwall’s overstrained theory.

J. W. MACDONALD.

“PSYCHOLOGICAL ILLUSION”

Sir,—With regard to the phenomena of the late Miss Ada Besinnet, there is, I think, little doubt that Dr. Dingwall’s view is the correct one. After a long study of her mediumship, Dr. Hyslop came to the conclusion that she was an hysterical subject who whistled, sang, moved tambourines, etc., in the darkness while in a state of auto-hypnosis. Nevertheless, Hyslop admitted that he was unable to imitate successfully her “spirit-lights” by any means known to him—though, of course, this does not necessarily mean that the lights were supernormally produced.

The recognition of the illuminated faces by many sitters was, I believe, a curious example of psychological illusion. The sudden lighting up of the Medium’s face and the varying intensities of illumination no doubt combined with an atmosphere of eager expectancy to play strange tricks with the imagination. What, I suggest, Mrs. Donohoe actually saw were two illuminations of Miss Besinnet’s face in slightly different positions following each other in rapid succession, thus producing an illusion of simultaneity. A similar illusion not infrequently occurs at “direct voice” seances when a supposed “spirit” voice is sometimes imagined to be simultaneous with that of the Medium.

In 1921, I attended three sittings with Miss Besinnet, and my notes are beside me as I write. On two of these occasions the control, “Black Hawk,” warned me that I was to see the face of “a young man,” and I naturally expected my brother Frank. In my notes I observe that the “young man’s” face which appeared for a few seconds at the *second* sitting was “a distinctly feminine face resembling in some respects that of the Medium,” while that of the *third* and last sitting is described as “undoubtedly Miss Besinnet’s face with a halo of white material draping the head.”

And yet, upon the girl’s face which appeared at my first sitting, I lavished such extravagant terms as “etherealised as of finer clay,” “grave yet full of personality,” etc., which seem to indicate that, at first, even I was not immune from the atmosphere of imaginative contagion. The progressive disillusionment, in fact, is precisely similar to that of a lover who at first is unable to see the loved object as it really is.

S. G. SOAL.

Another witness testified (and one re-testified) in *LIGHT* May 14, 1936 p. 310:—

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

MISS BESINNET'S MEDIUMSHIP

Sir,—It is usual when a great Medium passes on for controversy to arise as to the quality of the mediumship. I say no more about the luminous figures which appeared at the Ada Besinnet sittings; but I have not heard Dr. Dingwall or other critics express an opinion about the singing which took place. The voices seemed to be near the ceiling. Some fine duets by a male and a female voice were given on the occasion when I sat at the British College of Psychic Science. Could Ada Besinnet sing duets as a man and a woman?

The little spirit girl called “Pansy” apparently moved about the room, talking in a child’s voice. At one time she seemed to be standing just behind my chair, while she kept up a conversation about the gramophone with Mrs. McKenzie at the other end of the table. Is it suggested that Ada Besinnet herself did the voices as well as the materialisations? If not, she must have been a very remarkable Medium, apart from her even more unusual phenomena.

A well-known clergyman was present. He locked the door of the seance room before the lights were put out, and he unlocked it at the end of the sitting.

Highgate Road,
London, N. W.5.

S. M. BOWLEY.

MRS. DONOHOE REPLIES

Sir,—“Those credulous sceptics! “I cried with Robert Blatchford while reading Mr. Soal’s letter on Miss Besinnet’s mediumship (*LIGHT*, 7th May), particularly where he reports Dr. Hyslop’s conclusion that she was “an hysterical subject who whistled, sang, moved tambourines, etc., in the darkness while in a state of auto-hypnosis.” I feel sure that, like myself, the great majority of those who heard the musical items referred to—the unique whistling, skilled tambourine playing, and above all, the singing (first in a well-trained soprano voice, and then in a glorious and most powerful baritone)—would brush away as absurd the suggestion that one frail woman produced them all. Had Miss Besinnet been capable of doing so, she could have commanded fabulous sums for public demonstrations of her phenomenal gifts. What a star turn the “woman baritone” would have been! And how immensely foolish, as well as wicked, then, on her part to waste her time tricking people into the belief that they were listening to spirit performers!

I cannot accept Dr. Soal’s “explanation” of why I saw two faces. There was no “eager expectancy” in me to account for it. I had hoped—and prayed—that my elder nephew, Egerton, might come, but had no thought of seeing the younger, and the surprise was almost overwhelming in its intensity when their two heads, seemingly poised in mid-air, appeared in front of me. I could not have been mistaken. Though brothers and bearing a family likeness to

each other, they were noticeably different, especially in their way of smiling—and it was their smiles I saw first and last. Moreover, my neighbours, right and left, confirmed the vision of the two faces, and later on in the evening Egerton, speaking to me through the trumpet, confirmed it again. He mentioned by name other dear ones present who had envied him and Robbie their success in showing themselves. By the way, that conversation was most evidential: I wish space permitted of my giving it in full.

Finally, *LIGHT* reprinted what was perhaps intended as an authoritative summing up by Mrs McKenzie, Hewat having passed in 1929.¹⁵

Below is taken from *LIGHT* August 27, 1936 p. 554 – 555:—

MISS BESSINET'S MEDIUMSHIP

By MRS. HEWAT McKENZIE

In Psychic Science for July-September

NEWS has reached England of the recent passing of the American Medium, Miss Ada Bessinet, at a comparatively early age. Her visit to the British College, for some months in 1921, is still a vivid memory to many, as various letters in the current psychic press testify.

Her work at the College was the occasion of an exhaustive report by the Hon. Principal, Mr. J. Hewat McKenzie, which can be read in the first issue of *Psychic Science*, Vol. I., April, 1922, to be found in the College Library.

Miss Bessinet came from Toledo, U.S.A. She had been a private Medium for many years, having been developed as a girl by her stepmother in a home circle. In 1909-10 Prof. J. H. Hyslop, of the American S.P.R., investigated her powers, and his report, entitled “A Case of Hysteria” (the word used in a broad sense), left some points unsettled. Many requests reached Mr. McKenzie from U.S.A. asking him to endeavour to clear these up, and Miss Bessinet herself declared that her desire was to have light thrown upon her mediumship. The range of her phenomena was very wide: trance-control, fine sustained whistling, beautiful singing, both in clear-cut soprano and baritone voices, highly-skilled tambourine playing, gifts which it was stated the Medium did not normally possess and was never found rehearsing. In addition, there was direct voice and trumpet voice, direct writing, and the brief appearance of faces, self-illuminated by a fair light, presented as and often claimed by sitters as recognisable likenesses of deceased friends.

¹⁵ James Hewat McKenzie: November 11th 1869-August 29th 1929. See:—KNIGHT ERRANT OF PSYCHIC SCIENCE JAMES HEWAT McKENZIE. *Psypioneer* Volume 3, No.8 pages 169-178: —
<http://woodlandway.org/PDF/PP3.8August07..pdf>

The claim was made by the Medium and her friends that these phenomena were objective, separate from the Medium's physical possibilities; they all took place within a short radius of the Medium as she sat with the sitters round a large table, separated from the nearest sitter on her left hand by a gramophone kept in constant use during seances, which were always held in complete darkness. The general sittings open to members were remarkably uniform in method and quality, there was never a blank sitting, and apart from variations in the messages they might have been cut from a stereotyped pattern; these were highly pleasing to sitters because of the abundance and quality of the phenomena, always pleasant and harmonious, and if "Black Cloud," the chief control, was at times rather surly and uncommunicative, this was amply compensated by "Pansy's" cheerful and chatty personality.

A Research group composed of the College Council and selected members met once a week for special investigation, and it is upon the reports of this group, of which he was the director, that Mr. McKenzie's record depends. Miss Bessinet herself was charming to deal with, modest as to her work and unspoiled by adulation, careful of her life so that her work might not suffer, and apparently ready to assist the investigation; but to deal with "Black Cloud" was another matter, he offered little co-operation or advice when consulted, and seemed to resent any suggested change in the usual procedure. The trance state was undoubted, and while under it the Medium moved in her seat or "was moved" in the most noiseless fashion, so that those who sat next to her would declare that it was quite out of the question to think so; a hidden electric connection with her chair proved, however, that she did so continuously during the singing, the whistling, the tambourine playing, and when the faces were presented. At one stage of the séance the guides used a rope for binding the medium for added proof; this was done in the dark in a most skilful manner, but it was found that a carefully arranged slipknot allowed the Medium to release and return one hand, thus leaving her free for manipulations.

As many claimed recognition of the faces presented to them, recognitions often endorsed and confirmed by the trumpet voice, this phenomenon and the illumination used had to be tested, for many other experienced sitters, including the Research group, Mr. McKenzie, and myself, who had viewed the faces scores of times, seeking recognitions with the greatest sympathy and anticipation, had never been able to see anything but Miss Bessinet's own face presented at different angles and draped in various fashion with some white material which could not be regarded as ectoplasmic.

Sir Arthur Conan Doyle and Lady Doyle, who sat with Miss Bessinet on several occasions, testified to having seen the face of his mother and another relative in unmistakable fashion, others claimed to see two faces at the same time. At the last seance of the series it was agreed by the Research group that a weak red light should be turned upon the Medium when the faces were presented. Full responsibility was assumed by the group and the Principal for this procedure, which in view of other defects discovered in the mediumship was considered necessary. The Medium was found standing up and leaning across the table towards a sitter with a light surrounding her, but the usual drapery was absent. No appliance for producing the light was discovered. Miss Bessinet was nervously upset by the occurrence for several days, and also by the relating of what had been witnessed. Her defence was that she was in trance and trusted her guides, and had always been told by her home group that the manifestations were objective to herself. If the year had been 1936 instead of 1921 the use of infra-red photography would have

made such procedure unnecessary, though few physical Mediums yet avail themselves of this opportunity of verifying their work. In voice seances, for instance, many messages are considered evidential, but many doubt that these are delivered by an independent voice, or that the movements of the trumpet in the dark are beyond suspicion. Every Medium who presents himself or herself to the suffrages of the Spiritualistic public should be utterly willing to take advantage of this new opportunity in the interests of his own integrity. Until this is volunteered by the conscientious sensitives, the present very unsatisfactory condition of physical mediumship will remain.

Miss Bessinet returned to the States, and before leaving England was seriously advised by Mr. McKenzie to seek co-operation from her group and her guides in placing her work on a satisfactory basis as far as objectivity rested. Her friend, Mr. Wm. Roche, Editor of the *Toledo News Bee*, was also communicated with; Miss Bessinet subsequently married Mr. Roche, who predeceased her in 1934. Reports of subsequent seances came to our notice from time to time apparently under the old conditions. At one I remember it was claimed that a face was clearly recognised as that of Sir Ernest Shackleton by a sitter who knew the explorer. The kindest interpretation as to these variations of opinion as to the faces is that on occasions a vivid transfiguration of the Medium's features occurred, as has been observed with others. Such changes I believe depend on the psychic force supplied by individual sitters, which, in collaboration with the will of a communicator, may momentarily clothe the Medium's face with a resemblance to one who has gone; others who do not supply such force, or if they do it cannot be co-ordinated at the moment, see only the face of the Medium.

Again, there are mediums who seem to have the power of projecting a manifestation a considerable distance from themselves, others can only do so at a much shorter range, while others with similar dynamic force working through them cannot project it at all, and yet in trance may simulate the manifestations by means of their own organs and limbs. Such Mediums are to be sincerely pitied if they have not secured a group or guides who will be honest and frank with them about what is really taking place. From this point of view, Miss Bessinet may have been sincere in her protestations and she herself the victim.

It is for investigators of the present day, when opportunity allows, to use the fresh facilities available and improve on the methods of the past, and I have briefly outlined this case to recall to our minds what a serious and difficult task is involved in the scientific investigation of mediumship. But if the researcher can add one grain to our knowledge he is to be praised.

In the midst of controversy, I remember gratefully the pleasure and comfort Ada Bessinet gave to many, and the cheerful and courageous spirit she showed in her work.—(*Reprinted, by permission, from the July-September issue of "Psychic Science," the quarterly Transactions of the British College of Psychic Science, Ltd.*)

Note by LP:—

We have now placed varying evidence before the reader, though the specialist will also want to read the full reports mentioned; and it is tempting to say “If we are not confused, we have not understood the nature of the problem.” The medium was entranced, but some of the sitters, including some Spiritualists, thought that she or her spirits were faking certain phenomena, though not necessarily all. They believed this even though she was a very nice person. We cannot say “Oh well, sceptics will be sceptics” because whatever else Hewat McKenzie was, it was not sceptical. No one who published a handbook giving the precise location of Summerland as 1350 miles from the earth could be called skeptical (see Psypioneer June 2007, p129.¹⁶)

It is clear however that with the technology employed, there was no way of settling the question. We should therefore consider the possibility that Miss B., while entranced, was led to do things of which the conscious Miss B. knew nothing, and also that there may be other mediums in the same category, past and present.

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¹⁶ <http://woodlandway.org/PDF/PP3.6June07..pdf>

Important work is being undertaken in the Netherlands for future generations:—

Preserving the History of Parapsychology & Spiritism in The Netherlands

By Wim Kramer ¹⁷

Introduction to part one:—

The purpose of this article is to present an insight in a project in The Netherlands to preserve historical journals, books and archives on parapsychology and spiritualism. We noted that in the past five to ten years a lot of historical materials like correspondence, archives, journals and books have been lost for ever, since nobody really cared enough to actively try to preserve them. The exceptions of course are some private collectors. However this category has the disadvantage that they often specialize in a very narrow topic—thus neglecting many topics that are important from the point of view of the history of science and culture—and that they do not make their collection publicly available to researchers. They may even try to keep secret what they possess in their collections.

Moreover, every collector has a ‘limited time frame’ and thus often ‘by the end of the day’ the collection that was carefully built up and maintained for years suddenly ends up in the old paper basket thrown out by relatives who do not care about it. In the best case relatives will try to sell parts of it to antiquarian book dealers. If this is the case often the precious books and journals start a new life as an ‘object of desire’ and represent now financial value as an economic asset instead of the original scientific value that is purely based on the contents.

In 2007 it was decided to start a project to try to stop the destruction of the heritage of parapsychology and spiritism. A project plan was made and thanks to generous support of the Dutch ‘Het Johan Borgmanfonds’ Foundation (HJBF), resources became available to begin. One of the most important success factors for a project like this is the availability of suitable space for all the logistics involved like collecting, storage, investigating and preparing the materials to be shipped in and out. After searching for several months we were lucky to find a perfectly suited office and storage space. A small office building in the centre of the Netherlands became available. Located in a remote and very quiet neighbourhood, the entrance is on street level, a private parking lot with much space, a small kitchen, a toilet, burglary alarm system and three office rooms giving in total about 120 square meters of useable floor space.



Front view of the Dutch archive project building

¹⁷ To contact the author:—w.h.kramer@ziggo.nl

What do we collect:

To protect ourselves from ‘overflow’ or ‘loss of track’ in the project, being two pitfalls that are very easily encountered in a large scale project such as this, we limited our hunger for collecting all kinds of materials by some rules of thumb. The first one is that the materials must be related to the history of Dutch parapsychology and psychical research as science, or as typical examples of a cultural phenomenon representing the ‘Zeistgeist’ thus the ‘spirit of the time’.¹⁸ We restricted ourselves not to collect all kinds of popular ‘mumbo jumbo’ books and magazines, since this will give an overflow very easily and will cost us too much time and space. The Dutch National Royal Library has, based on national laws, since 1972 the obligation to keep one copy of all books and magazines that are published in the Netherlands in depot. Also they have a program to collect as much as possible books and magazines published in The Netherlands before 1972. This means that most popular books and magazines on the subject of parapsychology and esoteric topics are already available in their depot.

Our second rule of thumb is to focus on international scientific parapsychological publications. The rationale behind this is that these publications are very rare in Holland. Only professional parapsychologists will have them and since all of the first generation and most of the second generation of these parapsychologists have died already, many of these rare publications have been lost. Often they were simply been thrown away by relatives—on Saturday morning when the old paper is collected—who were under time pressure to clear out the house as soon as possible and have no interest themselves in these materials or even the topic.

Public availability:

The output of our project is three fold. First, to maintain and preserve the materials for perpetuity. Second to make them publicly available to everyone who is interested to read or study them, and third there must be some sort of catalogue publicly available, preferably on the internet. The only way in the Netherlands to fulfil these three requirements is to hand over these books, journals and magazines to a professional library and to offer archive materials to the Dutch National Archive or to one of the Dutch regional archives.

As for the libraries, we considered the Dutch National Royal Library in The Hague¹⁹ and the University Libraries in The Netherlands to suit us best. In this way the materials are publicly available to everybody and, in the case of University libraries, they are located near the scientific communities that might use them most for scientific research or in student projects on Bachelor or Master level.

¹⁸ We also restricted ourselves not to collect Theosophical publications, publications on Free Masonry or publications dealing with the Hermetic tradition. The reason is that these fields are already covered by other institutions and libraries in The Netherlands and thus publications are already available to the general public. In Amsterdam there are the Theosophical library (see: www.theosofie.nl) and the Ritman library (see: www.ritmanlibrary.nl). Both are very well equipped with impressive collections and are open to the public. For Free Masonry the main office and museum is in The Hague (see: www.vrijmetselarij.nl).

¹⁹ See:—www.kb.nl

In the past two years we have handed over tons of materials to the Dutch National Royal Library in The Hague and to the Groningen University Library in Groningen,²⁰ which is located in the far Northern part of the country. The additional advantage of the choice of these two institutions is that now collections are available not only in the western and middle part of The Netherlands, but also in the far Northern part of the country.



Unloading books and journals at the Dutch National Royal Library in The Hague This shipment contained a large collection of rare British Astrological journals.

Origins:

All this sounds great but is useless if there are no sources that will supply materials. Luckily however, reality showed us very soon that we were ‘right on the spot’ in time for a project such as this. In the past years considerable amounts of materials were lost by simply being thrown away due to lack of space and interest. Some scientific parapsychologists considered spiritualistic journals and books to be obsolete and of no value at all anymore to science, so (they reasoned) why keep that rubbish on your shelf or in the library of the institute? However some collections of books and archive materials of Dutch parapsychologists in 2007 still existed, being stuffed in cold, damp cellars and on badly isolated attics having often been stored there unattended for many years.

When we started our project, it worked like a magnet. Suddenly from all corners of parapsychological society in Holland there was a positive response and with great pleasure people handed over materials in their possession to include in our project. Also the Dutch society of spiritualism ‘Harmonia’, established in 1888,²¹ had a ‘locked room’ in their headquarters building filled with archives, books and journals that in essence had been stored in the past and not been touched for decades; they decided to join us. This of course was a great advantage since now also early spiritualistic books, journals and magazines became available. Another great gift came from Miss Lisette Coly of the Parapsychology Foundation in New York.²² She sent us free of charge copies of all titles in the PF Proceedings and Monograph series to include in our project. The PF intends to send magazines and journals published by them in the past which are missing in our current collection later this year. More international gifts were received.

²⁰ See:— www.rug.nl/bibliotheek/index

²¹ See:—www.harmonia-nl.org/index1.html

²² See:— www.parapsychology.org

Alejandro Parra from Buenos Aires²³ handed over free copies of the Argentina parapsychological journal to me in November 2009. Early March of this year the British SPR²⁴ sent me nine boxes filled with copies of international parapsychological journals that do not fit any longer in their library collection.

Last but not least we are very pleased with the recently obtained two volumes of rare spiritualistic publications being volume 6 of 'The Carrier Dove', an illustrated weekly journal published in San Francisco back in 1889 and the 1848 (yes indeed that old!) volume of the 'The Univercoelum and Spiritual Philosopher', a biweekly journal of Andrew Jackson Davis and Dr. Samuel Byron Brittan published in New York. These two precious publications were made available to our project by the editor of Psypioneer for an extremely generous and moderate price. Although in general we do not pay for materials since there is no budget available, in this particular case we decided to make some money available out of our working budget since it truly would be money well spent: Not only we were able to add two extremely rare journals to our project—journals that will otherwise never be available at all in Holland—but also the editor uses the money to keep Psypioneer alive and 'on the net' maintaining free subscriptions for everyone.

The libraries:

The Dutch National Royal Library already had a rather impressive collection of, as they call it, esoteric, publications. However, this collection was far from complete and mainly based on the gift of two estates.²⁵ The first collection received in 1939 was the estate of Mr. RA Reddingius (1866 – 1939) a Dutch medical doctor. The second gift in 1990 originated from the collection of George Zorab, (1898 – 1990) an international known Dutch parapsychologist.²⁶ The total amount of books and journals based on these two estates is about one thousand. Our additional gifts of the past two years have completed several series that were already partly available but also brought in many new series and even journals that were not even known to the 'big' general Dutch database used by all libraries in Holland.

As for the University of Groningen library they only had a moderate and incomplete collection of parapsychological



Eleven boxes filled with books and journals including the almost complete collection of the Proceedings of the SPR, handed over to the University Library in Groningen in June 2009.

²³ See:— www.alipsi.com.ar

²⁴ See:— www.spr.ac.uk

²⁵ See:—www.kb.nl/vak/deelcoll/teksten/zorab.html Note that this library has also a fine collection of about 6000 books on Occultism. Some publications ranging back to the 1600's.

²⁶ See amongst other sources:— www.inghist.nl/Onderzoek/Projecten/BWN/lemmata/bwn5/zorab

publications and almost no publications on spiritism. Thanks to our recent additions they were able to set up a more serious collection of scientific parapsychological journals. This year we will continue to submit materials to both libraries in order to complete and extend the two collections.

Oldest publications:

The oldest publication we were able to submit to the Dutch National Royal Library last year was a Dutch book dealing with Astrology by Mr. Ludeman published in 1795 and thus printed on parchment instead of paper. The second oldest book was printed and published in London by Davis and Dickson, dealers in scientific books, in 1822. It was a translation from the Greek of “Ptolemy’s Tetrabiblos” by J.M. Ashmand, which also discussed the ‘influence of the stars’. Both these publications came from the collection of Jan Kappers (1914 – 2001), a medical doctor from Amsterdam who had been very active in parapsychology since World War II and was well known and respected by the international parapsychological community.²⁷

To be continued:

In the second part of this article we will give details on what is submitted already to the two libraries and what they can expect from us in the near future. In a third part of this article we will discuss some unique archive materials that were recovered in the past two years, including correspondence from Dutch Spiritists and mediums of the early 20-th century, and historical films of the late 1940’s of the famous Dutch healer and psychic Gerard Croiset (1909 – 1980), demonstrating his healing powers.

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<sup>27</sup> See amongst other sources: [www.answers.com/topic/jan-kappers](http://www.answers.com/topic/jan-kappers)

## BOOKS FOR SALE

Please e-mail [psypioneer@aol.com](mailto:psypioneer@aol.com) for details

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'*Magical Spiritualism - a warning address given in 1878 to mark thirty years of Modern Spiritualism*', Andrew Jackson Davis. Published May 2000 by Psychic Pioneer Publications, this is a small booklet 7pp £2.00 incl. U.K., postage (please add 20% for airmail).

'*The Mystery of Stainton Moses an address given in 1992 on the centenary of his death*' Leslie Price Published December 1999 by Psychic Pioneer Publications, this is a small booklet 8pp £2.50 Inc U.K., postage (please add 20% for airmail).

'*Occultism and Spiritualism* – a book review by, Stainton Moses originally published under the pseudonym M.A. (Oxon). Published 1999 by Psychic Pioneer Publications, this is a small booklet 10pp £2.50 Inc U.K., postage (please add 20% for airmail).

All three Psychic Pioneer Publications £6.00 Inc U.K., postage (please add 20% for airmail).

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