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## **ALEC HARRIS**

1897—1974

#### **BOOK REVIEW:**

Alec Harris – The full story of his remarkable physical mediumship, by Louie Harris.<sup>1</sup>

~~~~~

This is a nicely put together, illustrated book about the life and mediumship of Alec Harris as told by his wife Louie.<sup>2</sup> It is uncritical in its approach, and gives very little referenced information as to the actual events that are described within its 253 pages. Nevertheless, it is the most complete record available of the physical mediumship of Alexander Frederick Harris from Cardiff, South Wales and is well worth reading.

It appears that around the year 1934, Alec Harris *reluctantly* started to develop his mediumship under the mentorship of his neighbour, a medium called Mary Hewitt. By 1940, independent writing, voice phenomena and other related physical mediumship were being produced. Harris' full form materialisation was in its commencement.

The editor of *The Two Worlds* Ernest Thompson was an early witness to these materialisations and saw a *perfect female form* through Harris. Extracts from Thompson's article are published on page 134-5, but no reference to date and publication issue/s are given.

Maurice Barbanell, editor of *Psychic News* and medium Helen Hughes, also attended the Harris physical séance in August 1945. Again extracts of Barbanell's report are given on pages 137-140 which were presumably published in full in P.N.

Other testimonials given in the book are from Professor Theodore Johannes Haarhof (1892-1971) <sup>3</sup> and Dr. MacDonald Bayne (1887-1955) <sup>4</sup>

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> Alec Harris—full story of his remarkable physical mediumship by Louie Harris, Saturday Night Press Publications, York, England 2009: Available at Psychic News online Bookshop:—
http://www.psychicnewsbookshop.co.uk/product/652
Also available at Amazon see:— http://www.amazon.co.uk/Alec-Harris-Remarkable-Physical-Mediumship/dp/0955705045/ref=sr\_1\_1?ie=UTF8&s=books&qid=1271761217&sr=1-1

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup> For more book details see Psypioneer Volume 5, No.9 page 302: http://woodlandway.org/PDF/PP5.9September09..pdf

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>3</sup> On Frank Brown's Website—The Voice Box we can note Professor Haarhof also sat with the physical medium Mona van der Watt see:—
http://www.mediums-spiritguides.com/monavanderwatt.htm

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>4</sup> http://www.murdomacdonald-bayne.com/DrMac.html

Page 150 reveals that Harris became a focal point of psychic investigators, and was asked by the Spiritualists' National Union (SNU) if he would give test circles. Harris agreed. To my knowledge the SNU have never tested mediums,<sup>5</sup> or had any kind of investigative committees—there are no dates or references given. A number of séance reports follow as given by Harry Dawson a past SNU president.<sup>6</sup> These again are not dated nor any references given. Some of the brief quoted reports include two more past SNU presidents Ernest Oaten <sup>7</sup> and John Stewart.<sup>8</sup> These however, were not given under the auspices of the SNU. These reports are a collection of short reports taken at different periods, which also include other mediums, and were published under the title of *Materialisations* by Harry Dawson.<sup>9</sup>

For a more critical view of Alec Harris' mediumship see Psypioneer—Last Minute Halt to Infra Red Tests, June 2008. 10

In 1949, Alec Harris was at the peak of his mediumship. The central core of his mediumship throughout his mediumistic period was his love and devotion to healing which is demonstrated throughout the book. In March 1957 the Harris's left the U.K., to live in South Africa, and it would have been shortly after this date that Alec Harris became a professional medium. In 1961, an attempt was made by two journalists to show that Alec Harris and the spirit form were one in the same, I quote from page 239:

Eventually, it was the turn of one of the substitute sitters to be greeted thus. As Rohan was about to take his hands in welcome, the man sprang forward and grabbed him! Throwing his arms around the Spirit figure, he held on to him tightly, shouting: "I've got you!" The sitter was obviously convinced that he had captured the draped medium in the act of duplicity, masquerading as a Spirit form.

As Rohan's Spirit form quickly dematerialised there was a loud groan from Alec in the cabinet. Then came a cry of pain as the ectoplasm swiftly returned to his body with the impact of a sledgehammer.

This marked the beginning of the end of Alec Harris' materialisation séances, and the start of his declining health. Although the Harris circles continued with voice mediumship, Alec Harris died in his wife's arms at home on February 12<sup>th</sup> 1974.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>5</sup> Unlike the 'London Spiritualist Alliance' (LSA), who tested Helen Duncan in 1931. She conducted over 50 sittings, reports of these were published in '*LIGHT* between May - June 1931. Use our search engine for Helen Duncan: — <a href="http://woodlandway.org/">http://woodlandway.org/</a> —Psypioneer Journal.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>6</sup> Harry Dawson S.N.U. President 1953-1958

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>7</sup> Ernest Oaten S.N.U. President 1915-1920 & 1922-1923

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>8</sup> John Stewart S.N.U. President 1941-1943

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>9</sup> Published by:—Psychic New Bookshop, London 1959 12 pages

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>10</sup> Psypioneer Volume 4, No.6 page 140:—http://woodlandway.org/PDF/PP4.6June08..pdf

#### In conclusion:

The book brings out some points of interest and discussion:—

One interesting event is recorded on page 131, "while we were in the middle of a séance, Albert Stewart, Helen Duncan's famous Guide, materialised";

Spirit life on other planets has its history in the annuals of spiritualistic literature. An interesting point emerges on page 203:<sup>11</sup>

Hyman Klein came regularly. At one of the circles which Hyman attended a strange thing happened. A tall Spirit materialised wearing a mask which covered his whole face leaving only his eyes visible. This figure approached Hyman and taking him by the hand led him to the cabinet. Then in a serious voice he said: "I want to tell you that flying saucers do exist, although your world is sceptical of any reports of such. But I say to you that they will one day be an established fact, and will arrive on your planet before man destroys himself, but the time is not yet ripe."

With that he turned and disappeared into the darkness of the cabinet, only to return a few seconds later carrying a large model of a flying saucer which stood several feet in height, in fact it was taller than he was himself. "This," he announced, "is the type of machine men from space will use when they come. This is only a model. But this is what it will look like; this is what they will travel in when they come, these people from Space." We all inspected this strange contraption and were fascinated by it.

The Spirit spoke again to Hyman, "I will be with you on Thursday evening when you attend the Flying Saucer Meeting." Hyman thanked him, wondering how on earth he had known that it was his intention to attend this meeting ...

Psypioneer in May 2005 <sup>12</sup> published the "No War" spirit predictions. On page 93 we note that the *Spirit Guides* on this occasion tell us "there will be war" – and this would have been in direct contradiction to the leading *Spirit Guides* of the time!

The book generally tends to keep Harris's mediumship in the private circles, and rarely ventures beyond. For example it does not mention Harris' public joint séance with the American medium Keith Rhinehart who visited Johannesburg on his world tour in 1958. Psychic News has recently published an archived article on the mediumship of Alec Harris from 1960.<sup>13</sup> Articles reaching the British Spiritualist press were generally reported by the Harris family friend, Mrs Vidie Carleton Jones (died 1970).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>11</sup> This séance would date 1957 circa

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>12</sup> See pages 134-145:—http://woodlandway.org/PDF/Leslie\_Price\_PP13.pdf

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>13</sup> Psychic News Saturday 3<sup>rd</sup> April 2010, Issue Number 4050, back issues and subscriptions can be ordered direct see:— http://www.psychicnewsbookshop.co.uk/catalogue/12

## "SIAMESE TWIN" MEDIUMS JOINED BY BAND OF ECTOPLASM PRODUCE AMAZING MATERIALISATIONS IN RED LIGHT

Spirit voice speaks "pure fluent Zulu"

ONE OF THE MOST EXTRAORDINARY SEANCES OF ALL TIME HAS TAKEN PLACE IN JOHANNESBURG, SOUTH AFRICA. IT WAS A JOINT SÉANCE, AT WHICH TWO POWERFUL PHYSICAL MEDIUMS, ALEC HARRIS AND KEITH RHINEHART, WERE LINKED BY A BROAD STREAM OF ECTOPLASM, AND TEN FIGURES MATERIALISED.

The séance was given by Harris in return for one of Rhinehart's he attended in company with nearly 50 others, which went on for four hours! Here he heard pure, fluent Zulu spoken to a native servant of the house by his "dead" father, through Rhinehart's direct-voice mediumship.

Nearly every sitter received a personal message. The messages to Mr. and Mrs. Alec Harris included one from her mother, who gave both her Christian and surnames.

At the Harris séance, possibly unique of its kind, Rhinehart, the American medium who is on a round-the-world tour, sat with a dozen others and watched several figures materialise, including a spirit guide of his whom he recognised and conversed with. This amazing figure had a spirit light glowing inside its ectoplasmic head, and shining through the eye sockets!

#### "Living force"

Then a tall materialised spirit figure, known as "the scientist," appeared bathed in a strong bluish light, put his hands on Rhinehart's solar plexus and drew forth a long stream of ectoplasm. This he stretched and broadened as he walked backward to Harris, to whose body he joined it.

He next took a section of the ectoplasm to a sitter and told him he was going to give him healing. Mrs. V. Carleton Jones, who sends an account of the séance, says that the scientist "fed the ectoplasm into the patient's solar plexus, drawing it as he did so from Rhinehart, via Harris. It was a living force seen by all present, and it broadened and moved in a most amazing way. Then, in a flash, it was gone!"

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>14</sup> *The Two Worlds* Thursday January 25, 1958 (front page) price 5d. No. 3661. This article is already published online but does not credit its source or hold the original title see:—
http://spiritualismlink.forumotion.com/physical-mediumship-f5/the-mediumship-of-keith-milton-rhinehart-t88.htm

A further magnificent materialisation occurred when a leading guide of the Harris circle appeared with his whole torso transparent and showing a glowing light within.

His arms were solid and his ectoplasmic draperies hid his lower limbs, but his body was just a shell, with a pulsating light coming and going in a fantastic manner.

Everything that took place was clearly seen in the light of three red bulbs. Mrs. Carleton Jones comments: "This séance seems to dispel the theory that two physical mediums cannot sit in the same circle without cancelling each other's power. To me this was among the most wonderful experiences I have ever been privileged to witness."

She has attended scores of voice and materialisation seances.

Mrs. Carleton Jones describes Rhinehart's public sittings in Johannesburg as "a highlight in the psychic history" of that city. At his voice séance, half a dozen sitters received apports in the form of small hand painted cards, each with a different subject.

Each came, one at a time, through the floating trumpet. Recipients were asked to feel inside the trumpet and announced that it was empty. A rattling sound was next heard. The sitter then said that a card had materialised inside the trumpet.

Paul J. Gaunt

# A Forgotten Chapter

# Dr J. Valckenier Suringar and modern spiritualism

### **Derk Jansen and Wim Kramer** 15

[Note by Psypioneer:—We are most grateful to Dr. Wim Kramer and Dr. Derk Jansen for their contribution. Dr. Derk Jansen is a former lecturer in theology and wrote a dissertation about the 19<sup>th</sup> century interest of Protestants in the rise of spiritualism (1994). He has published many historical papers in church and culture-historical related magazines on how spiritualism influenced the lives and works of individual 19<sup>th</sup> century clergyman.

Dr. Wim Kramer, MBA (1956) holds degrees in psychology and business administration. Back in the 1980's he practiced for five years as a clinical psychologist, counseling clients who were suffering from alleged paranormal phenomena. In the past 20 years he held senior management positions in telecommunications. He has published articles on clinical parapsychology and the history of parapsychology in the Netherlands.

In the last issue, Wim published through Psypioneer "Preserving the history of Parapsychology & Spiritism in The Netherlands" <sup>16</sup>

#### Abstract

Prof. Dr. J. Valckenier Suringar (1864 – 1932) was a well known professor in Botany at the Agricultural University of Wageningen. After losing his son in 1920 he became convinced of the reality of the survival of the human spirit after bodily death. Based on his private séances with the Dutch medium Mrs. Akkeringa and extensive literature studies of other psychical occurrences, he tried to formulate a model—called by us: The Third Way,—in which he postulated the existence of a 'psychic substrate', in order to explain the spiritualistic phenomena within a more or less scientific context.

Almost three decades after the formation in 1882 of the English Society for Psychical Research, the Dutch *Studievereeniging* for 'Psychical Research' was founded. This name had deliberately been chosen to make the initials, SPR, match those of her English predecessor. At the first official meeting on 1<sup>st</sup> April 1920 the first chairman, professor in psychology and philosophy at the University of Groningen Gerardus Heymans (1857-1930), delivered a presidential address in which he pointed out the great merits of the English society: "She reminded the scientists that at the end of the day facts are more important than theories and that it not would be for the first time that a denunciation declared in the name of a theory, that was chosen to be preferred above the facts, had to be corrected later. To the occultists she gave the insight that what science denies at some stage of her development, not always has to be untrue but it certainly does not mean that it is true. However, whatever the truth may be: to determine that truth irrefutably, one always have to recourse to science' (Heymans, 1920, p.10).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>15</sup> This article was published before as a chapter in 'On the mysteries of research; Essays in various fields of Humaniora', Leeuwarden, 2007, and has now been slightly amended.. To contact the authors: w.h.kramer@ziggo.nl

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>16</sup> See Psypioneer Volume 6, No.3 pages 81-85:—http://woodlandway.org/PDF/PP6.3March2010..pdf

This declaration did not make him popular among a section of the original members, for the 'occultists', according to Heymans, (and here he had in view the so-called modern spiritualists), expected that the *Studievereeniging* itself would aim at the production of proof of members' convictions and work in a spiritual domain. <sup>17</sup> Just as unpopular amongst these spiritualistic members became dr. H. J. F. W. Brugmans, co-worker and former student of Heymans at Groningen University, who held the position of secretary of the board, and dr. I. Zeehandelaar, a psychiatrist from Amsterdam who was appointed Dutch SPR librarian, at its second official meeting in 1921. These two expressed quite plainly in both the spoken and the written word that not too much was to be expected in terms of co-operation on the part of the modern spiritualists among their ranks.

This was particularly emphasised by J. Valckenier Suringar (VS) (1864-1932), <sup>18</sup> at that time professor in botany at the Agricultural University of Wageningen, and profoundly interested in modern spiritualism. In the second issue of the *Mededeelingen der Studievereeniging voor 'Psychical research'* (MSPR) the irregularly published bulletin of the Dutch SPR, he particularly criticised dr. I Zeehandelaar, reproaching him for his a-spiritualistic, sometimes even clearly anti-spiritualistic, attitude. This stemmed from Zeehandelaar's wish to classify all phenomena as components of telepathy and consider them physical facts; it stood to reason that this would lead to the prevalence of a purely intellectual approach. <sup>19</sup> However, the hypothesis of modern spiritualism deals with soulful spirits, and examination of the hypothesis has to take account of this. Not only the intellect, but also the heart.

These were the words of VS, who by way of explanation recollected the following occurrence, "When I visited London I met by coincidence the medium Mr Peters. When I told him about another medium and the experimentation in Groningen <sup>20</sup> he at once said, 'Let the medium not go there; the atmosphere is so cold and unsympathetic that nothing can be achieved'. I am convinced that 'cold and lack of sympathy' not only will be the cause of the lack of success of spiritualistic experiments, but also as a result of it many spiritualists will refuse to give their experiences to our association." <sup>21</sup> At the end of his contribution VS pleaded for more empathy from participants in the annual meeting of the Dutch SPR, so that a state of mind could develop which assisted spiritual sittings. In this way he left room for the claims of the spiritualists.

Not much is published concerning this aspect of VS' life. In 1942, ten years after his death, the *Gedenkboek J. Valckenier Suringar* was published (Jeswiet, 1942), a memorial book about his

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>17</sup> The list of members of the Dutch SPR from 1922 contains 274 names. At least thirty members were modern spiritualists, i.e. about eleven percent.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>18</sup> In this text we will use the abbreviation VS throughout to distinguish him from other members of his family.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>19</sup> *Mededeelingen*, 1921, n° 2, 11.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>20</sup> In the year 1920 Heymans, Brugmans and others held a séance in Groningen with the English psychometric medium Alfred Voût Peters. This séance failed completely. Peters reacted by telling the experimenters, '(...) there is a sphere of cold here that you sent out to me. When I am feeling such influence I cannot work; unless you help me with your sympathy, I cannot work'.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>21</sup> Mededeelingen, 1921, n° 2, 11.

life and work. In it, however, the many articles he wrote about modern spiritualism are simply enumerated and are not evaluated.<sup>22</sup> In this article we will deal with this omission and answer the question as to what the contents of that 'forgotten chapter' should be.

#### **Family Background**

The origins of the patriciate family Suringar<sup>23</sup> lie in the Dutch village of Zurich (Frisian: Surch) located near the coast in the province of Friesland, in the northern part of the Netherlands. The lineage included many members who were very active in society. One is Willem Hendrik Suringar (1790-1872), who at the beginning of his career worked as a publisher at Leeuwarden, the capital of the province of Friesland, and later became quite famous as a writer and philanthropist. He was an uncle of VS. 24 The grandfather of VS was also a publisher, but his father, Willem Frederik Reinier (1832-1898), having intellectual capacities, chose a scientific career. In 1875 he became extraordinary professor in botany at the University of Leiden; some years before this nomination he had already been appointed director of the Hortus Botanicus of Leiden University. In the years 1884-85 he travelled to the Dutch West Indies, but the scientific results of this journey remained at the time of his death in 1898 and largely due to the availability of new information, still far from conclusive. His son, VS, who in scientific terms followed in his father's footsteps, later felt it his duty to complete this work as best he could, but he did not succeed in this. How hard he struggled with the task may be concluded from a report he compiled about his father's investigations, 'And with this I draw near to the heart of the case, the viability of the investigations. There has been not one moment in which I considered myself able enough to continue these investigations in the way my father should have done, but, for the sake of respect for him, his work and also for science and fatherland, I did not want to withdraw from it.'25 Regard for his father will also have played a major role in the choice of subject for his own dissertation. For it was the wish of his father that for his doctoral thesis VS would describe a family of plants that belonged to the vegetation of the Dutch East Indies.<sup>26</sup>

After completing primary and grammar school in his native town of Leiden, VS began his studies in mathematics at Leiden University. However, after obtaining his bachelor's degree he stopped his academic studies because of a 'weakness of his head'; for the rest of his life he

This book was published by the Society of Dendrology. As biologists they were probably not so much interested in this 'Psychical Research' aspect of the life of their founder and former president.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>23</sup> Jan (Valckenier) Suringar, by Royal decree of 22nd January 1885, won permission to place the name of his mother, Valckenier, before his own.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>24</sup> Jo Egging, 'Willem Hendrik Suringar als propagandist en intermediair van praktische filantropie' ('W. H. S. as propagandist and intermediary of practical philanthropy.' In: *Documentatieblad voor de Nederlandse kerkgeschiedenis na 1800*, 28 (2005) pp57-67.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>25</sup> J. Jeswiet (ed.), Gedenkboek, 44.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>26</sup> Het geslacht Cyperus (sensu amplo) in den Maleisichen archipel, benevens een overzicht van de geschiedenis der systematiek van de familie der cyperaceën. (The genus Cyperus (sensu amplo) in the Malayan archipelago, with a survey of the history of the taxonomy of the family of cyperaceën), (s.l.) 1898.

suffered (!) from bad headaches.<sup>27</sup> In 1891, after a two-year break, he restarted his studies in 'natural history', again at Leiden University. He was quoted as having neither natural ability nor pleasure in doing so, but this proved no impediment to his publishing during his studies at the university papers concerning the vegetation found in the German Rhine area and the Dutch tulip fields.<sup>28</sup> In 1898, a year after obtaining his doctoral degree, he was appointed lecturer at the Horticultural School at Wageningen to teach the taxonomy of horticultural vegetation and its *nomenclature*. In 1918 the Dutch government transformed the Horticultural School into the Agricultural University, and VS was promoted to a full professorship. He thus got the opportunity to widen his research topics at his own initiative.

He became founder of the *dendrology* (the science of trees) society in Holland and, among other interests, focused on the idea of relationship in nature. After his early retirement in 1925, he wrote to a friend in a covering letter containing his article with the schematic layout for his *otium*, [i.e. leisure] 'I spent a lot of time on the history of the idea of relationship. It puts me into a completely other field, the field of reason, intuition, belief and so on. In this way materialistic studies alter to become spiritualistic studies. For some years I studied the extensive literature of meta-psychic apparitions (telepathy, clairvoyance and such like) and I saw a lot of that topic and had many personal experiences. I wanted also to lecture about these things. My aim is not to clarify the facts, however important they may be, but to be enlightened about the secrets of our soul, of the inspired world, of the real Religion'.<sup>29</sup>

The foregoing shows that the interest of VS in so-called spiritualist phenomena developed at a later stage in his life. It was not coincidental that his interest in spiritualism began at the beginning of the nineteen twenties: on 20th September 1920 his son Frederik, pet name Frits, died in Utrecht in the age of twenty. There are several other examples of men and women who embraced modern spiritualism after the passing away of a loved relative or personal friend. To mention some examples from Holland: the author Marcellus Emants (1848-1923), after the death of his wife Eva Verniers van der Loeff in 1900, attended several séances. His colleague Hendrik Jan Schimmel (1823-1906), well known as an author of historical novels, twenty-five years before and likewise after the death of his life-partner, took the same course, becoming among Dutch authors of the nineteenth century the most interested in modern spiritualism. Less known is the politician Jonkheer Pieter Cornets de Groot van Kraayenburg (1808-1878), who after the death of his grandson Hugo in Batavia became a prominent member of The Hague spiritualist society *Oromase*. The clergyman Albertinus van der Heide (1872-1953) was, *mirabile dictu*, also a politician, having in 1925 become a Member of Parliament for the SDAP (Social Democratic Workers Party). Van der Heide, especially when he was ageing, indulged in modern spiritualism,

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>27</sup> Gedenkboek, 39.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>28</sup> Die Flora von Boppard und Umgegend. Keil 1895; Hyacinthus orientalis L en Tulipa Gesneriana L op Hollands' bollenvelden.(H.o.L and T.G.L on (?) Dutch bulbfields, (s.l) 1896.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>29</sup> Letter to Leonard Springer dd 19<sup>th</sup> July 1925. In: *Gedenkboek*, 55, 56. Leonard Antonij Springer (1885-1940) was an influential landscape gardener and dendrologist. From 1897 to 1900 teacher in landscaping at Wageningen, where he designed the *Arboretum*. VS, for a short time a colleague of his, dedicated himself enormously to the further exploitation of this institution.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>30</sup> Derk Jansen, *Op zoek*, 105.

and in this the decease of his darling daughter Hermien in 1943 played an important role. He was also very interested in the experiences of Sir Oliver Lodge, to whom he dedicated some pages of his *Mémoires* <sup>31</sup> (Jansen, 2003).

To VS the British scientist Oliver Lodge was a *point de mire*, and comparisons may be drawn between the lives of the two men. Both had a background in natural science and moved during the course of their lives from a more or less materialistic ideology to a spiritualistic one. Lodge's son Raymond died in 1915 at the Flemish front; VS lost the apple of his own eye, his son Frits, as a young man. The credibility of paranormal phenomena was for both Lodge and VS stimulated by contacts with a capable female medium. In the case of Lodge this woman was Mrs Osborne Leonard; for VS it was the Dutch medium Mrs Akkeringa. Apart from these individual parallels between the lives of the two men there are some more general ones that we present with some prudence. Both refused to believe that modern science had adequately formulated the possibilities of natural reality. According to them everything in the universe showed relationship and they felt that mankind would never entirely penetrate the depth of this notion. They also shared the opinion that discoveries in the psychic field were not contradicted by fixed knowledge, rather, such discoveries themselves belonging to nature, they could be considered as completing it. The religious character they had in common adds to the parallels; undoubtedly this will have contributed to a more open attitude to modern spiritualism.

#### Seances with Mrs Akkeringa

In the year 1921 VS and his wife made the acquaintance of Mrs C. Akkeringa-Kromme at a public séance. Mrs Akkeringa was at that time a well known and respected spiritualist medium in Holland. VS invited her to demonstrate in private sessions her "wonderful gift", his own words. These sessions took place in January and April of the year 1922 at the VS residence 'Berghem' on the Bergweg in Wageningen. In this same year VS began to publish his experiences and thoughts concerning his personal observations during séances with Mrs Akkeringa. His writing appeared in the spiritualist magazine *Het Toekomstig Leven. Maandelijksch tijdschrift gewijd aan de studie van het spiritisme en aanverwante verschijnselen.* HTL (Translation: Monthly magazine dedicated to the study of spiritualism and related phenomena). The series of circumstantial series of reports by VS were published in the twenty-sixth and twenty-seventh volumes of this magazine.<sup>32</sup> They were reprinted in parts slightly modified, as a monograph under the title: *Beschrijving van een psychometrisch helderziend medium* (Translation: Descriptions of a Psychometric Clairvoyant Medium) (Valckenier Suringar, 1922).

Mrs Akkeringa was a so-called 'psychometric medium', a person who can 'read' from an object the history or personality of the person to whom it belongs. 'The images are by an invisible power or force put into her brain and she tries to describe those words, attitudes and feelings as well as possible', recorded VS, <sup>33</sup> who, as quoted by himself, with the assistance of his wife made

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>31</sup> Derk Jansen, "Een persoonlijk voortbestaan," pp189-191.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>32</sup> Het Toekomstig Leven 26 (1922) 42-43; 151-154; 168-172; 184-187. *Idem*, 27 (1923) 4-6; 23-27; 33-37; 59-60.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>33</sup> Het Toekomstig Leven, 26 (1922) 151.

extensive notes during the séances. Mrs Akkeringa showed by use of photographs amazing examples of her powers, describing correctly and sharply the persons portrayed.<sup>34</sup> She was also able to make impressive portraits of the mother and the father of VS from objects like a bridal veil and a diary. According to VS, it was not possible to speak of telepathy in this case, for Mrs Akkeringa had in previous meetings never shown herself capable of this. She possessed just as little the capacity to 'see through things': that is, to be able to 'read' blank paper which someone has 'loaded' with ideas.

VS tried as exactly as possible to analyse the capacities of Mrs Akkeringa and he was struck by the fact that, given a certain object, she was able directly to define whether its owner was still alive. The gender of the owner of the object was for Mrs Akkeringa more difficult to interpret. But the direction in which she sketched the (geographical) history of the object was in all cases correct, 'she felt through the letters or objects America, the East Indies, France, Switzerland or thereabouts, and it always appeared to be right'. These data, independent of the character and possible contents of the object under consideration, were often sufficient for striking and convincing results. They led VS to presume that Mrs Akkeringa initially came to them by feeling the circumstances belonging to the mediating object, rather than seeing (parallel) images.

However, this explanation did not completely satisfy VS, and henceforth he went deeper into the matter.<sup>36</sup> He rejected the hypothesis of a collective subconscious by which the psychometric medium, with the assistance of psychic capacities and by clues from the object, should be capable to become aware of certain things. Also VS was not convinced of the hypothesis that it would only be the intuitive and associative interpretation made by the medium of the aura of the object in question. After discussing the pro's and contra's of both hypotheses VS presents his combined hypothesis of 'psychic contact': the psychometric medium does not just read the aura of the (passive) object, but also the object itself actively sends 'information' about its history and/or (former) owner into the medium. VS realised himself that he got nearer to the hypothesis of modern spiritualism and tried to remove this difficulty in referring to the method used by him at the (psychometric) séances: 'In my opinion here should be handled likewise as in the other sciences: the observer and describer gives the reader as much as he thinks that is necessary for the explanation of the facts and for the interpretation of them. And for the rest the reader must himself know or check how trustworthy is the author; the capacity to judge in this case depends on his experience and knowledge'. To Concluding his discourse, VS made an appeal to philosophers and psychiatrists to look without prejudice at the notion of 'psychic contact'. Not in the manner of the scientist Pluizer (Ferreter) in Frederik van Eedens novel De kleine Johannes (The Little John), a symbol for the negative, deductive and analytical approach, but positively, inductively and synthetically.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>34</sup> *Idem*, 168, 169, 170.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>35</sup> *Idem*, 151.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>36</sup> *Idem*, 170, 171.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>37</sup> Het Toekomstig Leven, 27 (1923) 33, 34.

#### De Tempel

It may be supposed, with some irony, that VS in his publications also held to his so strongly advocated idea of relationship, for he published his ideas not only in the modern spiritualist magazine Het Toekomstig Leven, but also in De Tempel (Translation: The Shrine), a theosophical-orientated magazine.<sup>38</sup> In the first volume of this magazine in 1923 there appeared no fewer than thirteen contributions by VS. In nine of these articles he dealt with the problem of 'Transference of thoughts along other than ordinarily, sensory means: in connection with two special cases in Holland'. 39 The first case occurred in the summer of 1920 on the Kerkstraat (Church Street) in the town of Vlissingen (Flushing). On the evening of 23rd July, seven ladies and gentlemen held a séance. A masculine spirit manifested itself via 'the cross' and by the end of the evening it appeared that the spirit had 'communicated' from the beyond via a quatrain in the English language. 40 This event would have been self-limiting were it not that it became known that on the same evening in a house on the opposite side of the road a boy of fifteen years old had 'by chance' been reading exactly the same poem. Such transference of thought in the shape of a poem from one residence to another in the same street was indeed something unique. In his series of articles VS tried to find an explanation for this remarkable event.<sup>41</sup>

The second case applied to an attack on a (maid) servant who was left badly injured. The event took place in The Hague on Thursday 1st February 1923 at 10.00pm. At the same time, some doors further down the road, two persons were sitting on either side of a table with a planchette <sup>42</sup> between them. They suddenly saw words written in pencil on the large sheets of paper lying on the table: 'Come on, come at once-evil is coming now-I can see it-I go through it-it is close and will support you—be quiet—over'. Again it looked like a case of telepathy, although VS here made the side-note that perhaps there could be more to it, for the sender of the message, the attacked (maid) servant, used language far too formal for the circumstances.

In his explanation of the first case VS did not use a spiritualistic hypothesis. The presumption that a ghost (an independent psychic substrate originating from the beyond) had transferred the poem he considered to be highly unlikely. However, he did not feel anything for an animistic

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>38</sup> This was not the first time VS had published in a theosophical magazine. Back in 1910 he published a translation of an essay by Linnaeus (1748) in the magazine of the Dutch Theosophical Society under the title 'Godsdienst en natuurbeschouwing' (Religion and observations on nature). Theosophia, February 1910, pp596-616.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>39</sup>De Tempel, 1 (1923) 71-76; 100-104; 132-134; 161-166; 180-186; 211-216; 274-278; 294-298; 322-324.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>40</sup> A 'cross' consists of two crossed lathes with a needle at its centre; under certain circumstances the needle will point to the characters of an underlying alphabet. The text of the poem said: 'The sun has set and now anew with fallen dew the grass is wet. Each little bird has sunks (sic!) to rest within its nest, no song is heard'.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>41</sup> This case was also, independently from VS, investigated and reported on by Dr Vollgraff in Mededeelingen der Studievereeniging voor Psychical Research, 1923, No. 5. A discussion of the report by VS on the case was published in English in (1923). 'A case of thought-transference' in Journal of the Society for Psychical Research, 21, pp170-175 and a brief account of it appeared in the issue of *Light* of 27th October 1923.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>42</sup> A planchette is a small, triangular board with a straight and two longer curved sides that rests on three little balls; in the angular point opposite the short side is a gap in which a pencil is placed, pointing downwards. Both persons placed a hand on the board.

explanation as a good theory for explaining the phenomena in this case either, because several causes made unlikely the hypothesis of transference of thoughts. <sup>43</sup> VS supposed that the solution could be found in the phenomenon of *extorisation*; something of the spirit (psychic substrate) of the boy had gone out, bringing his subconscious (in part) to one of the persons holding the cross. However, his super-consciousness had not been totally 'switched off' and the poem in it had acted like a trigger in the subconscious of the receptor, bringing out the poem. 'At the moment that the two stanzas came out the stimulus was ended and the psychic substrate of the boy withdrawn'. <sup>44</sup>

In the second case, the attack on the maid in The Hague, VS also rejected any spiritualistic interpretation. A spirit who used such words instead of calling for direct help was, in his view, not credible. The animistic hypothesis of telepathy did not satisfy him either, for the agent would certainly not have had the transferred words in her mind. On the contrary, she would have had in her mind only words of panic and distress at the moment she was attacked. Once more VS chose the interpretation that we were here dealing with—an activity of the psychic substrate. 'We can imagine very well [...] that the girl in her emotional situation of fear "went out" and in this way connected her psychic substrate with that of the persons of mediums. And it seems very acceptable that this happened with the medium most nearby; at that moment that medium was just in tune for the reception and expression of unconscious thoughts. 45 In this case the emotional pattern of thought of the attacked (maid) servant must have been 'translated' into more solemn language. These two examples show how VS was looking for an explanation: not for a simple choice between the spirit-theory of the modern spiritualists and an embracing of animism. 46 But a search for a so-called 'third way': a scientifically justified study of the phenomenon and its causes that also valued the hypothesis of psychic contact. How he proceeded along this direction of *cryptesthesia* we can find out by studying in more detail his articles in *De* Tempel.

#### A Third Wav

The 1923 volume of *De Tempel*, in particular, yields a rich harvest of material. On the one hand it contains reaction to a review by leading modern spiritualist and former civil engineer Felix Ortt <sup>47</sup> and a closer examination of the capacities of Mrs Akkeringa; and on the other attention to mediumistic phenomena. In the October issue of this 1923 volume, VS provides a sharp response to the Ortt review and further elucidation of terms used in his (VS') monograph about Mrs

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>43</sup> De Tempel, 1 (1923) 296. The most important causes he brought forward were the unfamiliarity with such a form of telepathy (by air) in the relevant literature, and the implausibility of the receipt of a *perfect* poem by the gentlemen at the séance who were *not mediumistic* at all.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>44</sup> *Idem*, 297.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>45</sup> *Idem*, 322, 323.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>46</sup> Animism: paranormal phenomena dealing with powers in living people and not the result of the activities of spirits.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>47</sup> Ortt is described in H. van Dongen & J.L.F. Gerding, *PSI*, passim. See also: http://nl.wikipedia.org/wiki/Felix\_Ortt

Akkeringa. The term 'thought-reading' should be 'thought-catching', for the medium, according to VS, 'caught' thoughts emitted from the (super) conscious of another person. 'Thought-reading' from the subconscious had to be understood as 'thought-collecting'.

Notions used by VS of aura, psychic substrate and psychic contact had also greatly bothered Mr Ortt, and VS acknowledged, 'it is all not very successful'. But Mr Ortt's assumption of a so-called 'second time-dimension' from which the medium could survey events did not satisfy him either. His criticism of the explanation of future-prediction, however, hit VS hard and using many examples he tried to prove 'that mankind has of itself much more knowledge of the future than it is aware of. And the clairvoyant gets his experiences from the consulting person, also in regard to the future, which matches with my ideas'. The explanation included the idea that a clairvoyant's vision of the future was latent knowledge that came into his or her own soul while time was abolished. VS for this purpose appealed in particular to investigations by the French astronomer and spiritualistic searcher Camille Flammarion (1842-1925) who in common with several others was of the opinion that in the soul of mankind was much more 'readable' concerning the future than was generally accepted. With this hypothesis of *mémoire future*, VS considered himself as having dealt with the objections of Mr Felix Ortt.

In the course of the year VS once more returned to notions of psychometry and clairvoyance; we may suppose that enough, in his view, had been said about the predictability of the future. 50 He gave a detailed review concerning Mrs Akkeringa and spoke highly of her reliability and capacities in the field of psychometry. This series of articles has a special character because into the discussion VS brought some personal matters relating to his family, including his son Frits who had passed away at the age of twenty. Séances with Mrs Osborne Leonard, (also a medium to physicist Sir Oliver Lodge, 51) and with another medium from London, Mrs Brittain, produced stunning results for VS. Of these the following is most touching. 'Most remarkable was a communication that I did not expect at all, that is, that he (Frits) was a "psychic spirit" playing as he had as a little child with his uncle Peter (Pieter) who died very young, but much older in years than he. Hereby we think involuntarily of many other stories of children who pretend to play with spirit children, and apparently it is the truth. But in relation to this communication, it is remarkable that I (VS) really did have a little brother who lived only a fortnight and who was called Pieter (about 1870)'. In this case VS firmly excluded any explanation in the fields of either telepathy or animism, but he also held strongly back from the spirit-hypothesis. In response to the question of what really could be happening here he said only, 'Ignoramus'.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>48</sup> De Tempel, 1 (1923) 356.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>49</sup> *Idem*, 381.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>50</sup> *Idem*, 'Psychometrie en helderzien' ('Psychometry and clairvoyance'), 576-579; 627-630.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>51</sup> Lodge published in 1915 the book *Raymond* with communications from fallen English soldiers; among them the son of Lodge, Raymond, who in 1915 was killed at the Flemish front. Also, Derk Jansen "Een persoonlijk voortbestaan" and: Janet Oppenheim, *The other world*, passim. In this book a note about Osborne Leonard: 'Sir Oliver Lodge, A Great Scientist', *The Times*, 23rd August 1940, 7, underscores the degree to which Lodge became associated with the war-inspired resurgence of popular interest in spiritualism. One of the mediums through whom Raymond allegedly contacted his family was Mrs Osborne Leonard, who subsequently became a prominent subject of SPR investigation, 482, note 163.

In the background, nevertheless, modern spiritualism played a part; in his publications this was also marked and his choice of words sometimes shows an ideological character. This appears particularly in some articles addressing mediumistic phenomena.<sup>52</sup> On this point he tried to avoid both the modern spiritualistic and the animistic hypothesis by pointing at mediums who 'came to action' whilst influenced by gazing at a crystal, by hypnosis or by suggestion. In respect of the third phenomenon, the first ideological signal, he did not exclude the activity of a free spirit: 'Even Richet,<sup>53</sup> who in general totally denied the survival of the human spirit after death, acknowledges that he cannot match some phenomena with his *cryptesthesia*. One of them is that meta-psychic experiments give better results if there is more trust in the spiritualistic hypothesis and the so-called 'controls' are considered as really independent spirits.<sup>54</sup> For the rest, VS came to the conclusion that the modern spiritualism of his day, with its high degree of self-suggestion, was not a properly founded system or one suited for future use. He expected much more of an exploration of the 'psychic substrate', the active psychic energy active both inside and outside the human body, of which he thought a residue would remain after bodily death and which could exert lasting intellectual and physical influence. He was also hopeful about the development of human powers: if humanity could increasingly have at its disposal forms of second sight this might eventually result in acceptance of the condition of medium as a normal one, and in this manner cryptesthesia comes once more into view. In this context, frequent use of the words 'psychic contact', standing for a secret quality of our consciousness, independent of modern spiritualistic or animistic interpretation, is not surprising. For VS the conclusion had to be that in the first place, all scientific means had to be applied before one could consider applying a modern spiritualistic hypothesis.

## Otium cum dignitate

On the last day of the year 1924 VS resigned from his professorship at Wageningen <sup>55</sup> for health reasons and on 26th February 1925 he gave his public 'farewell' lecture. <sup>56</sup> In his last lecture he spoke freely on subjects of importance to him, for instance the relevance of pure linguistic usage (nomenclature!) and about his lectures over the years, which, in retrospect, had not been totally satisfying to him. At the beginning of his career he had been too realistic, and only later on he had become aware of the importance of emphasising the fact of the phenomenon of 'natural connection' between plants. It could be said that his personal growth in regard to this insight

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>52</sup> 'Mediummieke verschijnsels bij normale personen' (Mediumistic phenomena of normal persons). In: *De Tempel*, 1 (1923) 464-466; 494-496; 'Mediummieke verschijnsels bij zieke personen' (Mediumistic phenomena in sick persons) Idem, 549-553.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>53</sup> Charles Richet (1850-1935): French physiologist who received the Nobel Prize in 1913. He had great knowledge of parapsychology and was among the first who tried to deliver evidence for extrasensory perception with the aid of statistics.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>54</sup> Mediummieke verschijnsels, 495.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>55</sup> A very nice oil painting showing a portrait of VS is still displayed in the 'Klein Auditorium' of Wageningen University.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>56</sup> De plantensystematiek en de plantengeografie aan de Landbouwhogeschool (The plant taxonomy and plant geography at the Agricultural university), Wageningen 1925.

might be compared with general human development, because here too the idea of the existence of a natural connection had been accepted only gradually. For the growth of this notion did not follow logical processes: '[...] as for *Homo sapiens*, a connection between the individuals of one kind is obvious enough through parental ties. The connection between the plants had nothing to do with individuals but only with species, gender and so on. And just as mankind, parents and children, by living together show their relatedness, species of plants grow as if in a muddle, so that nobody notices their relatedness. Besides, people believed that all species existed as they were created, once and for all; in what way could one speak of natural connection? The rising notion in the human mind of the idea of natural connection, in spite of the belief in a unique creation and without being forced by certain facts, is as miraculous as natural connection itself.'<sup>57</sup>

This was all the result not just of human thinking; intuition also played an important role. From the dialectics of thinking and intuition rose the conception of evolution of the great Swedish botanist Linnaeus, and even someone like Darwin, n' en déplaise lui and much later, moved in the same direction. The consequences of his ideas led to notions like 'the survival of the fittest', but according to VS, Darwin was too much materialistic and mechanical a scientist. It was not survival of the fittest that was the most important thing for VS but the inborn, autonomous sense of evolution of plant, animal and human being, and undoubtedly the human mind had the same capacities.<sup>58</sup> Evolution everywhere, but not absolute: '[...] the power for that enormous polymorphy was present in the original germs, as the butterfly is fixed in the caterpillar and the oak tree in the acorn'. 59 And so VS in his own way appeared to be a supporter of the bio-genetic law of Haeckel, according to which individual evolution is more or less an accelerated recapitulation of preceding generations.<sup>60</sup> This superseded law excluded Darwinism and, as VS claimed, the leading principle of society, as of vegetable life on earth, could not be the struggle for life but rather association and the maintenance of equilibrium. This view showed him to be a real representative of the nineteenth century (le juste milieu), but also somebody who adopted his own position in the debate on creation versus evolution. Not astonishing for a person who in other fields too, such as the exploration of the supernatural and super-sensual, set about finding a third way.

As will be shown later, there is something special in the case of this 'third way'. In an article in 1927 VS characterised those occupied with psychical and spiritualistic phenomena. <sup>61</sup> The first category, untrustworthy due to their unwillingness to apply healthy criticism, comprised those religious spiritualists who interpreted all phenomena with help of the spirit-hypothesis. On the other hand, he gave more credit to the scientific spiritualists: they could not be tricked and they

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>57</sup> *Idem*, 7, 8.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>58</sup> *Idem*, 13.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>59</sup> *Idem*, 12.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>60</sup> The ontogenesis is a recapitulation of phylogenesis.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>61</sup> 'Metapsychica en Spiritisme. Een opzienbarende gebeurtenis' I (A spectacular event). In *De Tempel*, 5 (1927) 24-27.

criticised the phenomena using scientific methods. Examples were the Italian scholar E. Bozzano and Sir Oliver Lodge. 'Bozzano borrows his conviction from many well-controlled phenomena, although he cannot escape the results of a lodged opinion that radically interferes in the emotional life. Lodge also leans on facts, but even more on psychical phenomena observed by him or by relatives in well-known psychic mediums. This second group of people estimates the case like a physical matter. The third group comprised those who acknowledged the phenomena but did not believe in the survival of the human spirit. These people tried to interpret phenomena through physical and psychological laws and did not hesitate to go in search of the extension of these laws; of course they rejected the 'spirit-hypothesis' absolutely. According to VS these *metapsychici* were the best observers. The fourth category he defined were the real anti-spiritualists who did not care about so-called meta-psychic phenomena, only writing to him in terms of denouncement.

VS declared himself at home among the representatives of the second and third categories, a seemingly ambiguous position for him. Studying the phenomena, as previously said, he wanted to hold as long as possible to pure scientific methods by employing the physical and psychical laws but he did not exclude the spirit-hypothesis. A couple of quotes will show how he linked up the spirit-hypothesis using what Germans so elegantly denote *Heilsgeschichte und Heilsgeschehen*. He wrote, 'The spiritual hypothesis may be strongly attacked; however, it is of great importance, while it leads us to the deepest human and religious matters. More, it leads us to the idea of God'. In an article of 1925 VS gives his opinion even more plainly. 'And, proven or unproven, spiritualism will probably soon play an important role; on the one hand perhaps protecting western society from its destruction in consequence of abuse of great scientific and technical knowledge in the interests of the pursuit of gain and delight, and on the other hand protecting it from a corruption of religion. <sup>63</sup>

This combination of propaganda for modern spiritualism and the fight against materialism was not original. In 1860, two years after the introduction of modern spiritualism in Holland, the acting president of The Hague spiritualistic society *Oromase*, Major J. Revius, had already emphasised this in a speech to members. 'For if we know the rules of spiritualism then we have the opportunity to develop in knowledge and virtue towards the infinite; for Creation, as we understand it, is endless and that's why we will always have at our disposal means to perfect ourselves, for which we are destined'. In this way he tried to apply the scientific goal of that time, the search for the laws of nature, to the kingdom of the spirits. In this way also the reprehensible striving after materialistic and sensual pleasure could be fought. <sup>64</sup>

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>62</sup> Idem, 24.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>63</sup> 'Over bewustzijn, onderbewustzijn en de psyche van den mensch' (II) (About the conscious, subconscious and the psyche of man). In *De Tempel*, 3 (1925) 282-284, 284.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>64</sup> Derk Jansen, *Op zoek naar nieuwe zekerheid*, 82.

#### In Between

VS used the first years of his otium to write a substantial book of 420 pages in which he summarised many of his preceding studies published in *De Tempel* and added the results of some new investigations and insights. This book was published in 1927 in two volumes under the long title: Verschijnselen van gedachten-overdracht langs anderen dan gewoon zintuigelijken weg, naar aanleiding van gebeurtenissen in Nederland. (Translation: Phenomena of Thought Transference along Another way than Ordinary Sensory Perception, with reference to events in The Netherlands), (Valckenier Suringar, 1927). The new cases he presented, in addition to the above mentioned two cases in Vlissingen (Flushing) and Den Haag (The Hague), are the description of an apparition, a communication received using a planchette and a game of chess with an unknown spirit. 65 In comparison with the first two cases, these descriptions and explanations are very brief and add little new insight into the thoughts and opinions of VS. He maintained that in all these cases there could have been activities of a 'psychic substrate' that during a state of 'sleepiness' (a better, modern expression for what is meant there would be 'altered state of consciousness') influenced a 'medium at a distance'. Thus in such way that ideas came out which did not belong to the medium but to the person whose psychic substrate became active. 66 In so describing things he embarked upon his 'third way', known as *cryptesthesia*, and we are not astonished to find him starting his book with a quote from Charles Richet, who accepted only this method for the explanation of occult phenomena, 'L'Ensemble des faitsq'on les appelle spiritiques ou occultes ou métapsychiques—est vrai, authentique, indestructible ...'. 67 Nevertheless he cannot help but quote Oliver Lodge on the same page, and so we end up in modern spiritualism again. The end of this book has the same atmosphere and emphasises the idealistic and utopian character of modern spiritualism.

VS published his book privately and even offered it to interested persons free of charge 'by addressing the costs of postage and packing (25ct) on giro number 4357 or otherwise', as announced on the front page of some copies. His ideas may lead him to be considered a loner, perhaps. Or, more complimentarily, as a mediator, <sup>68</sup> but among the ranks of the modern parapsychologists, especially those of the *Studievereeniging for Psychical Research*, he was an outsider. <sup>69</sup> For them he was too much a modern spiritualist who used scientific methods and nomenclature to ventilate ideas which were in essence irrelevant. For some modern spiritualists, on the other hand, VS was too neutral; somebody who basically bowed to the results of science and seemed to reject the spirit-hypothesis.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>65</sup> Verschijnselen van gedachtenoverdracht (1927), 44-53.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>66</sup> *Idem*, 211, 212.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>67</sup> *Idem*, 5.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>68</sup> The *Indisch Spiritistisch Tijdschrift*, 1 (1930) nr. 12, 142 writes about him, 'He belongs to the neutralists between the right and the left wing and can do justice to both points of view'.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>69</sup> In 1928 P.A. Dietz and W.H.C. Tenhaeff announced the start of their *Tijdschrift (Journal) voorParapsychologie*. VS was mentioned in the list of future contributors. However, he never published a single line in the magazine. According to Tenhaeff VS was a disciple of one of the founding fathers of modern spiritualism, Sir William Crookes. (1936, *Het Spiritisme*) 42. For some time Tenhaeff was himself also an adherent of Crookes.

#### **Conclusions**

This article discusses an unknown aspect of the life and work of a botanist from Wageningen, Professor dr. J. Valckenier Suringar (VS). His interest in psychical research and modern spiritualism is a 'forgotten chapter' in previous publications about his life and work (e.g. Jeswiet, 1942). However, his characteristic attitude and opinions concerning this field and the phenomena involved deserve to be rescued from oblivion. About 1920, after the decease of his son Frits, he indulged in spiritualistic phenomena and psychical research. He tried to combine his training as a scientist with his personal beliefs about God, nature and mankind.

Exploring spiritualistic phenomenon by the use of scientific methodology is always a very tricky adventure. At the end of the day one always has to make the choice either to believe in the existence of spirits from beyond or to explain all phenomena as originating in the human mind. VS tried to escape from this choice by looking for a 'third way' and formulating a theoretical model that might explain all the phenomena in full and at the same time leave both options, spiritualism or reductionism, open. Reading VS' articles and trying to follow his line of reasoning is not very easy. He wanted to find this 'third way' so badly that his line of reasoning is not always as straightforward as one might have expected from a scientist with his background. However, VS was not the only scientist to address the methodological near-impossibility of bridging the gap between the two belief systems.

To some degree VS may be compared with the well-known Dutch parapsychologist W. H. C. Tenhaeff (1894-1981). Tenhaeff, who was a student of psychology in the 1920s, also dealt personally with these issues but chose the scientific option in formulating his opinion that parapsychology was in fact one of the many different branches of the tree of mainstream psychology. Thus his scientific opinion was that so-called paranormal or mediumistic phenomena should be considered as originating from the human mind. However, Tenhaeff as a person never really abandoned the spiritualistic hypothesis. Even in his later work he was to write, 'Personally I do not believe that in the science of parapsychology we will ever come to a total rejection of the spiritualistic hypothesis.'(Tenhaeff, 1973). This was also the conviction of VS. The divergence between the two scientists was that for VS the spiritualistic hypothesis meant much more than just a scientific theory. In his opinion it could become a future religious and social programme. This, in an even more explicit way, was an opinion shared by Prof. Dr E. A. Greven. This worker advocated the opinion that spiritualistic phenomenon actually demonstrated that life was not meant for the purpose of gaining as much as possible material or financial wealth, but that God had a 'higher plan' for mankind (Kramer, 2006).

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>70</sup> In this article the other explanation, one of simple fraudulent behaviour on the part of the medium, is not the issue of discussion.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>71</sup> W. H. C. Tenhaeff, *Het Spiritisme* (ninth edition) Den Haag 1973, 63.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>72</sup> Tenhaeff himself mentions this difference of opinion in his book review of VS's book *Tijdschrift voor Parapsychologie*, vol. 1, 1928/29, pp191-192).

So we find the opinions of VS to be in line with others like those of Tenhaeff and Greven. This is an interesting position, because in a way he turned himself into a sort of 'lone cowboy' travelling along his third road; or, in more classic terminology, a knight in search of the Grail.

However, even back in the 1920s ideological ideas of spiritualism as the 'gateway' to a new and better world were not new. Many decades before VS and others formulated their opinions and hypothesis, the well-known Dutch author, pedagogue and outstanding spiritualist Elise van Calcar (1822-1904) advocated similar opinions on 'utopian spiritualism'. Although VS tried to explain spiritualistic phenomena in an open, modern and unbiased way he was in fact a child of the nineteenth century.

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## The Physical Mediumship of Gordon Higginson

## Note by LP:

Although Gordon Higginson was a very influential medium in the second half of the last century, little was published about him in the outside world. Most accounts appeared in Spiritualist newspapers, and as early as 1968, an old lady (a GH fan, but not blindly) lent me a collection of accusations of fraud published in The Two Worlds (TW) and Psychic News (PN). At least one later Spiritualist editor preferred not to publish such charges, as they led to loss of subscribers. But charges of fraud, often from other Spiritualists, pursued GH to the grave, even from those who acknowledged his strenuous labours.

In 1977, in a rare charge outside the movement, the "Sunday People" alleged fraud. This was of some interest to me as I heard I was supposed to be connected to the exposure, which I was not. Recently, Dr Barrie Colvin kindly accepted an invitation to give an inside account of how "The People" story came about; which was not instigated by him either.

We have regularly published stories about alleged fraud in Psypioneer (e.g. about Florence Cook, or more recently Ada Besinnet) but we do not do so lightly. In this particular case, we do so for several reasons.

- 1. The eminence of the medium, and the centrality of the location. Can it really be that the president of a Spiritualist body engaged in fraud in their headquarters complex, at a place for educating mediums? Surely not, that would be what Lord Denning called (in another context) an 'appalling vista'.
- 2. Dr Colvin is an experienced investigator, not in the least one of those armchair sceptics who bedevils the field.
- 3. These events happened over 30 years ago, and are a part of history. If they cannot be discussed in a small circulation history journal, where can they discussed?
- 4. There is very little in SPR or similar publications about GH. How then can be younger students be educated about such problems if they cannot be argued about?
- 5. It is sometimes suggested that it is wrong to make accusations when the persons are dead, and that they should be made when they are alive and that is a valid point. But we need to consider what happens to people who do this. In 1978, for example, I did publish criticism of GH in "The Christian Parapsychologist". I was promptly denounced on the front page of PN for making "a vile attack," while GH consulted his solicitor, as was his right. It is possible that only the obscurity of my prose saved me from a libel action! More usually, critics at the time were ignored by the authorities.

Before publishing this report, we discussed it with a person involved in the chair arrangements for a number of GH séances; and with an experienced Spiritualist who witnessed impressive ectoplasm with GH away from Stansted, and more dubious phenomena there. We were also fortunate to obtain a written statement from a psychic who worked with a second reporter involved in the Sunday People story.

We make no claim to have explained generally the mediumship of GH; only to have thrown some light on what was in its day, a front page story.

## **Dr Barrie Colvin writes:**

Back in the mid-seventies I was fortunate enough to attend a number of séances involving ostensibly gifted mediums, all of who claimed to be able to produce physical phenomena. I spent many long and interesting hours in the presence of mediums such as Queenie Nixon and Leslie Flint. Queenie Nixon was a top transfiguration medium and produced excellent examples of direct voice mediumship. She always allowed me to use an infra-red camera to record the physical manifestation of spirit entities. Likewise, Leslie Flint was very cooperative and I have in my collection a number of interesting tape recordings from séances conducted by Leslie in his London home.

Whilst I am not a Spiritualist, I have attended many Spiritualist churches, particularly in the Greater Manchester area, where I attended University for seven years between 1966 and 1973. Manchester is rich in the Spiritualist traditions and many Spiritualists became close friends over a period of time. My own interest in the subject was a personal one and was driven by a desire to get to the truth of Spiritualist claims – could the dead be contacted following their departure from the physical world? My mind was always open to the possibility that things of this nature could be achieved in principle and I always felt, and continue to feel, that there is a strong body of evidence, particularly from the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, supporting the notion that communication with discarnate entities is possible. I have been presented with many examples of psychic ability over the years, at least some of which are suggestive of life after death. However, during this private quest for the truth, I have also encountered evidence that strongly supports an alternative explanation, one example of which I have been asked to elaborate on.

I first met Gordon Higginson in 1972 when he attended a Spiritualist church in Manchester. I was rather impressed by his apparent ability to provide strong evidence of survival using his mental mediumship. His evidence was usually very specific and could easily be checked more fully later. This is something that I did on several occasions and often found his confirmed evidence to be very impressive indeed. There were those at the time who suggested that Mr. Higginson made a habit of obtaining details of known sitters prior to the meeting and then used this information as part of his mediumship routine. I remember the so-called Bristol allegations of 1978 in which individuals claimed that Mr. Higginson derived information from the church notice-boards and other church records. He then claimed to have received the same information

from the spirit world during his show of apparent mediumship. I am unable to comment on these claims but continue to believe that he was indeed able to produce excellent evidence using his well-known clairaudient gifts. However, on the other side of the coin, and in the true spirit of wishing to pursue the truth, I also witnessed events, that found their way to the front page of the Sunday People on 17<sup>th</sup> July 1977. Whilst the story presented by the paper was largely factual, there are two important points that need some clarification. The first relates to timing of the article, which appeared about three years after the events. The second relates to the facts themselves.

Following the publication of the allegations of fraud, there was an outcry from the Spiritualist press and from other sitters who attended the same séances as myself. The most common theme relates to the long time delay between the séances themselves and the article being published in the national newspaper. The reason for this is actually quite simple and relates to my desire to evaluate the evidence in an objective, scientific manner for my own personal satisfaction. I have never been interested in getting into public debates about specific cases that I have investigated, partly because it is often a complete waste of time. In most cases people will continue to believe what they wish to believe, often completely ignoring the factual evidence presented. This is the case for both believers and sceptics alike. Their firmly held views do not change when presented with evidence that contradicts their preferred theory. This is something which is seen on a very regular basis today when high-profile academics appear on television telling us all that certain events cannot happen, simply because the events would contravene the laws of physics. Having attended several physical séances in 1973 and 1974, I came to my own personal conclusion about the genuineness of the events. I was not interested in making anything of this, any more than I had done following the impressive séances of Leslie Flint, also in 1974. The facts gathered by me were helpful in coming to a personal conclusion regarding the subject of the paranormal in general and nothing more need be said.

Unfortunately, my private thoughts on the subject of Spiritualism, much of which was very supportive of the movement in general terms, were shared with a fellow member of the Society for Psychical Research in 1976. Despite having given me an assurance that my views would be remain confidential, the SPR member took it upon them self to inform others of the facts relating to the Gordon Higginson séances. The information was then transferred to a journalist working for the Sunday People who contacted me to say that an article on Gordon Higginson's mediumship, and my involvement in the Stansted Hall sittings, would appear in their newspaper. I made attempts to prevent the publication but to no avail. The journalist, Harry Warschauer, later sent me a proof of the proposed article and I was disturbed to discover many inaccuracies. This left me with two options – either to say nothing and allow a grossly inaccurate version of events to be published, or cooperate with Mr. Warschauer to put the true account on record. I decided to do the latter, this being the better of two undesirable options. He and I met in Amsterdam at the beginning of July 1974 and I spent about one hour correcting his original manuscript. This explains the reason for the long delay between the events themselves and the publication of them.

Regarding the facts of the case, these are largely as described in the original Sunday People article. I had attended several physical materialisation séances at Stansted Hall, mainly as an outsider in an otherwise entirely Spiritualist gathering, but on one occasion I was accompanied

by a fellow SPR member, Brigadier Frank Spedding. For me, the important and decisive moment came during a séance held on 23<sup>rd</sup> March 1974. Frank Spedding and I attended a sitting that had been specially organised for members of the Eltham Spiritualist Church. A coach arrived at Stansted Hall with about sixty members of the church. The seating arrangements had all been prearranged in the main hall and, following discussions with Mr. Higginson, I was informed that I would be allowed to take my infra-red camera into the séance-room but that I could only use it if the spirits gave their permission. I agreed that this arrangement was fine. However, at the start of the séance I was informed that I could not use the camera because the Eltham members had already been told that they could not bring cameras into the room. It seemed that the use of my camera would have been unfair to them.

The general conditions of the sitting were very similar to those of previous occasions. The traditional cabinet had been placed in front of the seating area and I had personally inspected it before the commencement of the séance to ensure that nothing was in it. On this rather dull evening there was almost no light entering the room from outside despite a significant gap between the curtains and the ceiling. A 60 watt red light was used throughout the séance, this being controlled by myself using a rheostat. The light was mounted on the top of the cabinet ensuring that no light entered the cabinet itself. In fact it was almost impossible to see whether the curtains to the front of the cabinet were open or closed. The séance began with Higginson inside the cabinet. Following a period of heavy breathing, a stooped figure appeared at the cabinet opening and uttered a few words of welcome. The voice of an old man then asked that a chair be placed in the cabinet, which was duly done. During the course of the sitting, certain figures appeared from time to time a foot or so in front of the cabinet. I could only see the top of the figure's head which looked remarkably like that of the medium covered in some sort of material, this being illuminated by the dim red light. At one point a quantity of material could be seen coming from the medium's mouth and trailing downwards towards the floor. It appeared to be an inch or two wide at the top and broadened out to about nine inches lower down where it was then lost from sight. The first thirty minutes were taken up with messages from the spirit guide, Paddy, who gave detailed messages to several members of the audience. Paddy's voice appeared to come from the direction of the cabinet and he asked that we all sing something Irish in order to break the ice. This was done, after which a whitish form appeared at the join of the curtains. This prompted the sitters to coax the entity a little further out of the cabinet. Paddy then asked me to make the light a little brighter, which I did at once. The medium was clearly seen standing up in the cabinet and a length of ectoplasm was apparent. It appeared to come from the mouth of the medium and almost reached the floor. He then returned to the interior of the cabinet and there followed a period of clairvoyance.

Further into the séance proceedings, and following a hearty rendition of "When Irish Eyes Are Smiling", a figure once again came out of the cabinet and approached the front row of the sitters. It stood in front of a young lady sitting next to me and began to speak in a whispery, almost inaudible voice:

"Bless you"
(Bless you)
"How are you?"
(Oh, I'm fine)

#### "It's nice to see you"

It was during this phase of the proceedings that I came to realise that something was amiss. As I closely examined the spirit form, albeit in dim light, I could clearly make out the features of the medium and I had no doubt that the figure standing before me consisted of a normal light material such as cotton draped over the medium's physical form. Frank Spedding came to exactly the same conclusion, which prompted him to conclude in his report presented to the SPR: "Our opinion was that the materialisations were crude fakes which should not have deceived anyone of normal intelligence".

The figure returned to the cabinet where much heavy breathing continued followed by some more examples of apparent clairvoyance, none of which was convincing. Finally, the medium left the cabinet and walked out of the dimly-lit room. The lights were then turned on and a long discussion about the séance took place. It was agreed by all that the evening had been entertaining.

For me, this séance was a turning point in my investigation of the Higginson phenomena. I became quite convinced that the effects were staged and had a normal explanation. However, in view of the fact that both Higginson and the cabinet had been examined before the séance, how did the substantial quantity of cotton-like material get into the cabinet?

On my return home I listened to the tape recordings that I had made of the Higginson séances. Perhaps there would be some clue as to how the trick was accomplished. During one of the séances held some months earlier Higginson was seated in the cabinet and complained that he was not comfortable. He asked for the chair to be replaced by a more comfortable one, which was done. Could it be that some material was hidden under the seat of the second chair? This could potentially explain the methods used to produce the ectoplasmic forms. I then listened to other tape recordings and noted that a chair was <u>always</u> placed into the cabinet <u>after</u> the commencement of proceedings. This struck me as being rather suspicious.

It was many months before I had the opportunity to visit Stansted Hall again. On the next occasion I arrived early and spent time chatting with members of the SNU staff. I also discussed the forthcoming sitting with Gordon Higginson, including the subject of the infra-red camera. Once again he emphasised that the decision with regard to its use rested with the spirits themselves but he was hopeful that we would be able to achieve it on this occasion. With about two hours to go before the scheduled start of the séance, I noted that various members were busily putting the cabinet and chairs in place. At this stage the séance room was clearly open and I was able to wander in and out of it at will. I helped out with the placement of chairs and made a note of who appeared to be in control of the detailed layout of the room. Once everything had been arranged, everyone left the room and, despite later arguments from Spiritualists who were not present at the time, the door to the room was not locked. Having been present at several séances in the past and having helped with the room arrangements, I was now almost 'part of the furniture' as far as the general SNU staff were concerned. I had no difficulty at all in walking into and out of the séance room during the course of the next half-hour. In fact several people did so, each interested in consulting certain books that they had obtained from the library.

During a brief visit to the room, I quickly felt under the seat covering of each of the chairs in the front row of the seating area. I decided to start at the centre of the row and work outwards. Within just a few seconds I had discovered a large quantity of muslin-like material tightly wrapped up and placed underneath the seat of the end chair of the front row. It was also apparent that this chair was different to the majority in the room, having been taken from the dining room earlier. The whole investigation took no longer than about twenty seconds. My immediate reaction was to tell someone of my discovery but, on reflection, I decided to say nothing and simply observe the proceedings as usual. In many ways the events took their normal course. The chair in question was placed into the cabinet after the first session of clairvoyance. I was later invited by the spirit to approach the cabinet and actually feel the ectoplasm. Clearly it had the feel of the fabric I had previously discovered. I left the séance immediately after its conclusion and did not return. It was a truly disappointing end to an investigation.

Over thirty years on, I am still very much involved with the investigation of Spiritualist phenomena including important work with a sitter group in Maidstone. Looking back at the evidence in general, I remain very impressed with some historical reports of physical phenomena, including the séances attended by William Crookes and other Victorian investigators. More recently, I have been most impressed with the current physical phenomena that have been displayed by the group of sitters in Kent. There have been many more examples of impressive mediums in the intervening years. Unfortunately, the physical manifestations of Gordon Higginson, as judged by the performance at Stansted Hall, do not form part of that wonderful body of evidence.

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