

DANIEL DUNGLAS HOME REVISITED –  
EVIDENCE OLD AND NEW:  
AN ESSAY REVIEW OF  
*KNOCK, KNOCK, KNOCK! WHO'S THERE?*<sup>1</sup>

by ZOFIA WEAVER

The life of D. D. Home and the phenomena he produced have been the subject of many publications over the years. The latest contribution, a lengthy volume by Patrick Waddington, provides us with a wealth of information about the arrival of spiritualism in Britain from America, the background of many of the people who became involved with Home in Britain and in Florence, and the influence of spiritualism on a variety of literary figures and their works, chief among them being the Lyttons, the Trollopes and the Brownings. The book's sixteen chapters concentrate mainly on a fairly short period in Home's career, as indicated in the title. The amount of detail supplied by the author can be overwhelming, and at times seems hardly relevant; however, the main aim of the book seems to be to provide sufficient evidence to discredit D. D. Home for ever. It fails to achieve this goal, at least as far as this reviewer is concerned, for a number of reasons.

From the beginning, we are left in no doubt as to the author's philosophical stance and emotional attitude to his subject, and the language of the book encourages us to share them. In a curiously old-fashioned style, the reader is confronted with exhortations reminiscent of Victorian tracts ("Men and women of good sense need to resist it [spiritualism], now as always, by appealing against its absurdity"—p. 34), or the somewhat forced jocularity of the allusive and alliterative titles of the chapters (e.g. For unto us a Dan is Born, Brewing the Brownings). Terms used to refer to Home often carry a judgment within them, as when we are invited to participate in "stinging the Scaramouch that was D. D. Home with the dart of "Mr Sludge, 'the medium'" (p. 472).

Stylistic considerations apart, much more serious problems arise when the author's theoretical premise affects the treatment of the evidence and the sources. The theoretical premise here is that the only possible explanations for Home's feats are conjuring or delusion: "... for those most friendly to Home to affirm vaguely that the wonders he performed were for the most part never accounted for according to natural laws is ... beside the point, inasmuch as those wonders were impossible to perform without trickery or deception." (pp. 41–42). Unfortunately, once such a rigid theoretical framework has been established, evidence has to be forced into it by whatever means are to hand. We are thus offered a potted summary of magical devices such as the phantasmagoria machines and automata (pp. 1–7), or Pepper's ghost (pp. 65–66), as

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<sup>1</sup> *Knock, Knock, Knock! Who's There? Or, How Chiefly British Luminaries were or were not Bamboozled by the 'Spirit Medium' D. D. Home at London, Ealing and Florence in 1855, and What They Made Thereof Thereafter* by Patrick Waddington. Whirinaki Press, Upper Hutt, New Zealand, 2007. 713 pp. No price given.

possible explanations. However, even a cursory search on the internet will reveal that the illusion of Pepper's ghost involved sheets of glass and special lighting techniques, while magical lanterns were also reasonably substantial objects. Even if, as Waddington claims, the procedure during séances was generally dictated by the medium (pp.68–69)—not true of many of Home's sittings—the implication that the apparatus involved could have been smuggled unobserved into private houses is quite astonishing.

Equally astonishing is the claim that Home manipulated the younger children in the Rymer family (in whose house many séances were held at one stage) into helping him with his conjuring tricks (pp.123–126). Apart from the fact that the author (as he himself admits) has not a shred of evidence to support this allegation, this again begs the question of how Home managed on the much more numerous occasions when neither the Rymer children, nor any potential confederates, were present. Yet it seems obvious that accusations of fraud must be based on a thorough and competent examination of Home's *modus operandi*, including all the known facts about the conditions under which the events took place. In his book, *The First Psychic*, Lamont (2005) undertook exactly such an examination, as well as providing an in-depth analysis of the misrepresentations and fabrications created by Home's opponents. Lamont (whose book is dismissed by Waddington as “entertaining but thorough”—p.41) found himself unable to offer a solution to the Home enigma, but set the standard of investigation in terms of expertise and attention to detail; readers familiar with his book may find Waddington's return to disregarding the practical conjuring aspect of the question particularly disappointing.

As those familiar with Home's story will know, his stay in Florence in 1855 involved some events, still obscure, which somehow offended the morals of many in the expatriate community. Waddington concludes from this that people did not like to admit that they had been fooled, and so instead blamed Home's character failings for turning away from him (p.328). This fits in with the world view which rules out any interpretation other than fraud, and therefore the author is surprised and exasperated by the attitude of such witnesses as Elizabeth Barrett Browning, who referred to Home as “morally worthless and a true medium”, or Tom Trollope, who “despite all the contrary evidence . . . remained convinced that Home could not have attained his most striking results by any physical or rational activity” (p.397). However, the “contrary evidence” seems to involve mainly conjectures as to what might have happened; these are then presented as devastating attacks, such as a description of Home's features being “less composed” when the table was being lifted, as if he was “assisting the spirits” (p.329), or diatribes by Dickens, who is praised for not having been bamboozled (p.473) even though, not having attended any of Home's séances, he was hardly in a position to judge their authenticity for himself.

One of the reasons given by Waddington for his rejection of any interpretation other than fraud or delusion is his claim that such phenomena are not a universal human experience (p.67). This demonstrates a rather limited knowledge of reported human experience, and indicates that the author's reading of psychical research cannot have been extensive. Admittedly, the intensity and

quantity of phenomena as described in relation to Home are rare, as are the particular spiritualist context and the social milieu in which they manifested themselves. However, phenomena such as seeing apparitions, contact with the dead, knowledge acquired in inexplicable ways, or inexplicable movement of physical objects, have been reported throughout the ages, in a variety of cultures, often by rational people with no religious commitment. Some of these phenomena have also been produced by groups of people whose purpose was to reproduce them as a form of experiment, such as the 'Philip' project (where the sitters invented a character which then seemed to take on a life of its own, producing many phenomena difficult to explain: Owen & Sparrow, 1976). In *The First Psychic*, Lamont, instead of offering any simplistic solutions, invoked the concept of the Trickster, a mythological, ambiguous figure who reminds us that "we do not always know what is going on, that perhaps we never know for certain" (Lamont, 2005, p.275). It may be that 'Tricksterland' is the best metaphor we can have at present for that borderline world where the mental and the physical interact in ways which we do not understand.

In Tricksterland, one would expect much trickery and gullibility, and many people who swore Home was genuine would also swear to the genuineness of the Davenport brothers (Steinmeyer, 2003, offers a thorough explanation of that particular phenomenon), as well as many other fake mediums. But there were many discerning observers as well, such as Patrick Alexander, who noted that the degree of the phenomena, such as hearing raps and experiencing cold breezes, varied from person to person (Alexander, 1871); while Théobald Walsh observed that the hands which appeared in séances were not visible to everyone (Walsh, 1858, pp.97-98). Logically, if the phenomena were fake physical objects, they would have been seen by everyone. At this point, we might blame differences in the phenomena experienced on the degree of suggestibility of those present; but suggestibility is a flexible concept, and can be stretched to the limit, when trying to explain some reports. A participant in sittings with Franek Kluski (a medium less famous than Home but scarcely less remarkable) reports that, when talking to an apparition, "I had the impression that I was talking to myself, but it was some other myself, in a word, that my consciousness was talking to my subconscious." (Niemojewski, 1921, pp.138-139, my translation). He, as well as other witnesses, reports that the appearance and behaviour of the phenomena seemed to be shaped to a large extent by the participants. In this case, instead of religious fervour, the attitude appears to have been that of a group of creative artists (the participants belonged to creative professions), well-attuned to each other, working together on what might be described as an experimental construction project. This is clearly a long way away from everyday reality as we know it, but the 'deception', or 'delusion', (if these are the right terms) is self-aware and sophisticated, akin to a flight of creative imagination and producing look-alike physical realities with strange twists to it. Accounts like these, as well as those from thousands of spontaneous reports, seem to indicate that Tricksterland still remains largely unexplored by science, and the study of personality and consciousness is only at the beginning of the journey.

Waddington's hostility to Home finds an outlet in numerous innuendos based purely on conjecture. Thus, the mugging attack he suffered in Florence

may well have been a stunt staged by Home himself (pp. 316–318); whenever Home complains of being ill, he is accused of playing “the card of poor health”, or “remembering to be ill” (p. 404) (whereas the author seems to know that in reality Home was fearful of becoming too repetitive in his tricks; see p. 268); blood on Home’s handkerchief probably came from biting the inside of his cheek (pp. 322–327), and his sudden recoveries are viewed as highly suspicious (p. 347). Yet, according to Carrington (1920), Home’s ill-health follows a pattern observed in mediums regarded as genuine, and matches closely Kluski’s bouts of sudden and violent ill health (Okolowicz, 1926).

The author’s hostility to his subject also influences the treatment of at least some of the sources. All reporting is selective to some extent, but it is disconcerting to find that a previously unknown source, describing Home’s séances at the Tsar’s court in Russia, is reported in a manner which seems to hint that Home resorted to trickery, when that is not the case. Waddington refers to the diary of Anna Tyutcheva, daughter of a famous Russian poet and lady-in-waiting to the Russian Empress. He quotes at length Tyutcheva’s acerbic comments about the inanity of the communications, and comments that: “While conceding the reality of what she saw at the séances, she found herself forced to reject any supernatural interpretation of it.” (p. 64). Yet what she actually rejected was the spiritualist interpretation of what she saw, which is not the same as rejecting the supernatural. Tyutcheva might be called a hostile witness: being very religious, she mocks the table-turning craze and expresses her mistrust of Home and those who believe in his claims; however, her eye-witness experiences are related in some detail, she is baffled by them, and concludes that Home must be in touch with “elemental” spirits of the lowest order. Having been excluded from the previous séances, described at second hand in earlier passages in the diary, she goes on to give the following account of the séance which she attended herself (Tyutcheva, 1853–1882, Volume II, pp. 186–188, my translation):—

5 January 1859

Yesterday I was present at the most interesting thing in the world, namely, a séance with Home . . . The table was being polite today and asked us to come in. Alexandra Dolgorukaya, Mrs Maltseva and I went in. Countess Tolstoy refused for religious reasons. We found there Prince Suvorov, the Counts Shuvalov, father and son, Count Adlerberg, Baron Liven, Kushelev and Grimm, but the last three went to the Empress and the ladies who remained with her; they were in the neighbouring room. At last I witnessed all those interesting phenomena about which I had only heard until now. The table, on which we rested our hands but only lightly, rose up from the ground to a significant height, tilting to the left and to the right, while neither the lamp, nor the pencil, nor any of the other objects lying on the table, moved at all from their places, even the flame of the lamp did not sway. The table answered with blows; one meant – no, two times – perhaps, three times – yes; five times meant that the table wants the alphabet, and then it indicates the letters with knocks. I received answers to my questions by means of blows under my stool; as my stool was a wicker one, I felt the blows as much as I heard them. I first asked the table whether it was a spirit. The table answered that it was the spirit of a dead man and demanded the alphabet, but refused to write for anybody apart from Prince Suvorov, and for him it wrote the name Friedrich . . .

We saw the accordion, held by Home, play by an invisible hand some very moving church chants. It also played when held by Mrs Maltseva and Princess Dolgorukaya. We heard the rustle of a hand on the silk dress of Princess Dolgorukaya, and in this way answers consisting of "yes" or "no" were given. I was firmly grasped by the knees. All the time I and all those present felt ice-cold breezes on our hands and legs. As far as I am concerned, I was quite stupefied and, moreover, was fighting off sleep, even though I was very interested in what was going on. (That night I slept eight hours straight through, although I had been suffering from insomnia because of headache and toothache.) One of my first questions to the spirit was whether he can manifest in stools as well as tables, and all the time I felt small blows on my stool . . . All the blows were taking place with unbelievable speed, there is no way in which the actions of a person, or even a number of people, could keep lifting a big and heavy table with such speed. This must be either a magnetic phenomenon, not observed until now, or it is supernatural. But in the latter case you ask yourself, why are these manifestations so stupid . . . The most curious thing, in my view, is that the large clock with the playing monkeys, which I have already described and which after Home's last séance at Tsarskoye [Selo] woke me up in the night when the mechanism started working by itself without being wound – the very same clock, which has been moved here and put on top of the wardrobe, and which had not been wound and had not played since then, started working again this morning, although it has not been touched; all the monkeys started moving and the noise was tremendous. But this mechanism is very difficult to wind, requiring a thick key, and only then will all the three monkeys start playing their instruments. I must say that this incident made me feel uneasy. During the séance itself, on the contrary, I did not feel frightened at all, and felt more like enjoying it and laughing; as soon as I felt a touch I would involuntarily cry out.

When one reads the relevant diary entries in full, it becomes quite clear that the various ad hoc, messy and rearranged sittings precluded any chance of setting up a conjuring apparatus—and also, of course, any chance of properly controlled conditions. However, what is also interesting in this séance is the presence of Count Shuvalov (son); although not formally head of the Russian Secret Service until the 1860s, at the time of Home's visit he was already the real power behind the throne, with a wide network of informers. Foreign visitors especially were spied on routinely, and it is safe to assume that Home's possessions and activities would have been thoroughly examined without his knowledge, even though formal records were not kept by the Service until much later (Squire, 1968). Home would have been of particular interest to the Secret Service not necessarily because of his mediumistic abilities; what would have made him important was his association with the Branicki family. Home's relationship with them is usually summed up in a paragraph or two, yet his meteoric rise in Parisian and Russian society, his conversion to Roman Catholicism, and the future course of his life, owed much to the influence of the Branickis.

Apart from quoting a nasty rumour, and chiding other authors for "much ill-informed comment" about them (p.604), Waddington dismisses the Branickis as four immensely rich Russo-Polish "sybaritic siblings" who, "always in pursuit of kicks," picked up the "spirit rapper" as a "memento of Florence" (pp.341–342). However, the importance of the Branicki clan was much greater than Waddington implies.

The Branickis who befriended Home were indeed immensely, unimaginably rich; their enormous fortune stemmed from the fact that their grandfather,

one of the leaders of the Polish army, switched sides at the crucial moment, contributing to events which eventually led to Poland being partitioned between Russia, Prussia and Austria in 1795. Catherine the Great rewarded him with marriage to the niece of her favourite, Potemkin (rumour had it that the niece was Catherine's natural daughter), and showered fortune and favour on the couple. However, their son and his children (four sons and three daughters) did a great deal to redeem the family name as patriotic Poles. They felt themselves to be Polish, were fervent Roman Catholics (which was very much discouraged by the Tsarist regime), did their best to support Poland's cause and Poland's independence, and at times suffered considerable inconvenience and loss because of it. The eldest of the Branicki brothers, Xavier, had served in the Russian army and had been made adjutant by Tsar Nicholas I, who wanted to keep an eye on him because of Xavier "being infected by the worst—revolutionary France on old-style Polishness" (quoted after the entry in the *Polish Biographical Dictionary*). Having managed secretly to sell off most of his property and escape, Xavier was sentenced *in absentia* and had his remaining property in Russia confiscated. However, he was still fabulously rich, supposedly one of the richest men in France, where he settled and became very active in liberal and democratic circles. He was a friend of Louis Napoleon before the latter became Emperor Napoleon III, and worked towards restoring an independent Poland by plotting to have 'Plon-Plon' (Napoleon Joseph, nephew of the Emperor) made king of Poland. The brother of the Russian Tsar, Duke Constantine, was also secretly considered for the position by the plotters. The Branickis were thus the object of constant interest to (and constant harassment by) the Russian Emperor's bureaucracy and secret service, and were also in an ideal position to open doors for Home at the highest level.

Xavier's younger brother, Alexander Branicki, was an entomologist and botanist, and financed many natural science initiatives in Poland, presenting collections and financing grants and publications. It was he who befriended Home and became interested in mediumship. Unfortunately, the enormous library which he established in a restored castle on his Sucha estate in the south of Poland was destroyed by the Nazis during the Second World War, and it is unlikely that we shall ever know whether it held any accounts of the Home séances.

We do, however, have the reactions of two important witnesses from the period of Home's most intense involvement with the Branickis. One of them is Eliza Krasieńska née Branicka, one of the Branicki sisters; the other is her husband, Count Zygmunt Krasieński, for whom it might be claimed that he investigated Home more closely, and with greater animosity, than any researchers who came before or after him. He did not leave any specific accounts, but a lot of information can be gleaned from his letters and his essay on magnetism (Krasieński, 1931). As Krasieński was one of Poland's greatest Romantic poets, recognised as such even during his lifetime, much of his correspondence has been preserved and published.

Zygmunt Krasieński was deeply patriotic, and an aristocrat by conviction as well as by birth. He had a deep-seated disdain for the merchant and working classes, while idealising aristocracy as the class destined to lead the simple

and heroic peasantry. He believed that it was God and religion, not social systems, which held things together (Kraśiński, 1971, p.365). He was also a Romantic with mystical leanings, holding very definite views on the elevated role of spirits, and a Catholic, who believed that those souls which have been saved are with God. D. D. Home, with his claim to be in touch with spirits, as well as the antics of those spirits, were thus anathema to the poet on every level of his values and beliefs.

Kraśiński arrived in Paris at the end of December 1856 and stayed a few months (he suffered from a number of ailments and died in 1859 at the age of 47). He devoted a considerable amount of time to pursuing and investigating Home in a manner which can best be described as bullying, trying to prove him a fake. In spite of his efforts, he did not quite succeed, as can be seen from his remarks on the subject in a letter to a friend dated 11 March 1857:—

On the one hand I am convinced, that Hume's [*sic*] sickly organism does possess a force which can act at a distance from that organism, and at that distance it produces strange phenomena. On the other hand I am equally strongly convinced that at times, when this power, which is independent of his will and controls him rather than being controlled by him, is not sufficient, leaves him, weakens and disappears . . . he . . . helps the deficiencies of the force with the aid of his leg or hand under the table.

[Kraśiński, 1991, 11 March 1857, pp.268–69, transl. ZW]

Kraśiński described his conclusions, mainly his reflections on the nature of the inferior spirits involved in the séances and what they might portend, in an essay on magnetism (Kraśiński, 1931). Strangely enough, his letters do not refer directly to catching Home cheating on any particular occasion, even though that is implied. However, in his book on Home, Walsh (1858, pp.100–101) describes an incident in which a Count K. enters the room, and Home is unable to perform. Being touched on the leg, Count K. grabs the foot of Home, who excuses himself by claiming that the spirits pushed his foot in that direction, and then has a nervous attack. This incident fits very well into the relationship between Kraśiński and Home, which cannot have been easy for either of them. On the one hand, Home was a protégé of Kraśiński's brother-in-law, as well as of the Komars, who were brothers of Kraśiński's adored mistress, Countess Delfina Potocka. On the other hand, it is hardly surprising that Kraśiński's attitude would have had a paralysing effect on Home, who was hardly in a position to ban a close relative of his benefactors from the séances, but that is what eventually happened.

Eliza, Kraśiński's wife, was also very religious, deeply frightened by socialism and had a tendency to see the Apocalypse around every corner. No less hostile to Home than her husband but more emotional, she provides some fascinating snippets in her correspondence. We learn that in February 1857 Nina, Alexander Branicki's wife, was being driven to distraction by having to sit around for hours, with Home unable to produce any phenomena. In her earlier letters, Eliza feels quite superior about not being infected by the table-turning craze, but suddenly, in a letter dated 12 March, we hear:—

We are all shaken by Hume & Co. One day we are laughing at him, joking, seeing in him only another Robert Houdin. Suddenly something happens which turns all theories upside down and inclines one to see in him the devil himself . . . I must admit that I miss those idyllic times when one could count on still life to remain still and to live in

peace at least with one's furniture! . . . Recently I saw with my own eyes an armchair separate itself from the wall, move into the room and suddenly stop.

[Sudolski, 1996, pp. 199–200, transl. ZW]

And later on, in what is also a first-hand account, dated 22 March 1857:–

We wanted to catch him in the act, but things happened which would be impossible to achieve by tricks, but their supernaturality is so poor that it can only come from lower spirits. What do you think of a table in which the boards open up and a pale hand appears in the crack, takes a sheet of paper and a pencil, writes under the table and all this is returned, while the three-branch brass candelabra leaves the mantel-piece, moves through the air and hangs above the participants gathered around the table? On the sheet there are two cabbalistic signs, and then these words:–

“Be good Catholics (!)

“Love God

“To confession go everyone (!)”

What do you say about this orthography, is there not some malicious parody there?

As soon as I felt supernaturality, I moved away to the side. I don't like it.

[Sudolski, 1996, p. 200, transl. ZW]

In other letters, Eliza refers to a number of other incidents, involving her brothers, apparitions and communication from dead relatives. Unfortunately for researchers, Eliza's main interest was in saving her family from the divisive influences which she attributed to Satan, and in returning to normality. Her later letters may hold other clues as to the family's relationship with Home, and research into this continues.

Both Waddington's book and the research described above demonstrate that there is still a great deal to be discovered about D. D. Home by examining his times through the eyes of his contemporaries. But it is important to do so in a dispassionate and objective spirit, whatever one's personal attitude to that still enigmatic and fascinating figure. It is a disappointment that Waddington's enormous research effort has been directed simply to treading in the footsteps of Home's many detractors.

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