

THE SHADOW AND THE LIGHT: a defence of Daniel Dunglas Home, the medium.  
By Elizabeth Jenkins. Hamish Hamilton, London, 1982. ix + 275 pp.  
£12.95.

As the study of the social, literary and scientific aspects of the 19th century increased, so more attention was being paid to that somewhat neglected portion of the Victorian scene, namely the growing curiosity about the phenomena of Spiritualism and how far this extended to different classes of the population. This desire for information was not confined to England. Following the interest in mesmerism and the so-called higher phenomena alleged to occur in connection with it so a shift occurred from examination of mesmeric experiments to spiritualistic manifestations and thus table turning and table rapping, already well established in America, became almost a mania in parts of Europe enjoying a popularity almost as great as that in the New World. Even in Russia, following Betling's success in his mesmeric work, more and more attention was being paid to accounts of alleged para-normal phenomena occurring in the presence of certain mediums, and the arrival of a celebrated medium named Daniel Dunglas Home, in whose presence extraordinary phenomena had been reported, resulted in him being invited to demonstrate them in Imperial circles and before distinguished visitors at the Winter Palace.

Although the manifestations at Home's séances had been known both in America and some European countries for a number of years, his Russian visits both in the 1870s and later were to have a profound effect on his life and work. Accounts of the man and his work are numerous, but few have been written in the way that Miss Jenkins has chosen to describe her subject in her book. It is one of the best written and most original of the biographies, since the author not only writes as a believer in the genuine nature of the phenomena occurring with Home, but stresses the importance of dealing with Home as a person rather than simply as a medium and exposes the unworthiness of those who, when he was alive, sought to denigrate both him and his work, finally describing in some detail the *Lyon v. Home* legal battle of 1868 (*L. R. Equity Cases*, 1869, VI).

As has been said above, Miss Jenkins has been rightly condemnatory of the methods and mendacities of some of his more foolish biographers such as, for example, Mr Horace Wyndham who suggested that the red hot lumps of coal, reported by numerous witnesses to have been held in the hands of both Home and themselves, were glow-worms within red glass boxes. Indeed, one of the most striking features of this work is the space given over not to Home but to his detractors. A sorry tale it is; and although some of it has been told before it has never been dealt with so vividly thus illustrating how persons of the highest distinction in their own fields were guilty, in their hatred of Home, of acts of so shabby a nature that it is difficult to believe that the events as reported could have actually occurred. The persons selected by the author could hardly have been better. Her chosen three are Sir David Brewster (1781-1868) whose scientific, literary and technological achievements were noteworthy; William B. Carpenter (1813-1885), one of the most versatile physiologists, biologists and marine zoologists of the period and, strange as it may seem, the poet Robert Browning (1812-1889).

It was in 1855 that Brewster, accompanied by that rather eccentric genius

Lord Brougham, had the famous sitting with Home described by Podmore in his *Modern Spiritualism*. It will be remembered that Brewster was unable to explain what occurred; and in a letter to his daughter, published later in 1869, said so in no uncertain terms. This letter was written the day after the sitting; but later Brewster denied that he had been unable to explain what had happened and an acrimonious controversy followed in the press in which T. A. Trollope, who had been present at a second sitting, joined in to confirm that at this séance Brewster was again baffled, his later behaviour thus confirming what Miss Jenkins calls his 'shameless disingenuousness' (p. 36).

The case of W. B. Carpenter is, as the author states, even more surprising than that of Brewster and in some respects seems 'almost unbelievable'. So far as is known he never had a sitting with Home in his life, and his correspondence regarding the medium is so muddled that it is not easy to understand. On one occasion, describing an event at which he was not present, he affirmed that one of the sitters was an 'honest sceptic' who denied that the testimony of his fellow sitters had any validity whatever. This tale which Carpenter apparently took from some totally unreliable source was soon denied by the 'honest sceptic' who, writing to Home on the incident, adds a postscript to the missive worded '*Honest*, but not a sceptic'.

The case of Robert Browning is a good deal more complicated; and although Miss Jenkins has admirably summarised the affair she seems at times to have been puzzled by the poet's intense hatred and loathing which he felt for Home even after Mrs. Browning's death in 1861.

Although the motives underlying Browning's attitude towards Home may not yet be fully understood; yet it may not be out of place if I touch upon certain facts which might be thought to throw some light upon the affair and which are not, it seems, known to many psychical researchers. Miss Jenkins recalls the well known general story of the differences between Mr. and Mrs. Browning in their views on Spiritualism, but she makes no mention of the strange relationship between Mrs. Browning and Mrs. Sophia Eckley, the wife of a wealthy Bostonian, who met the Brownings in Rome in the early 1850s. Elizabeth and Sophia became great friends; and Elizabeth's devotion to Sophia was fanned by the interest that the two had in communication with the world of spirits. But another brand of affection was apparent to some. Indeed, Elizabeth herself suggested it in her correspondence with her sister Arabel when she says that Sophia had taken into her head 'to fall into a sort of love with me (spirit concordance and other her reasons)'. Mrs. Beecher Stowe (1811-1896), the American writer, thought that Sophia was a powerful medium since her rappings were audible even when she went to church and it may well have been that Elizabeth had to agree, thereby strengthening the bond between the two women. Things were, however, beginning to change. Elizabeth, it seems, began to suspect that Sophia's spiritual manifestations were not quite what they seemed: in other words she began to think that her friend was a fraud. 'Oh, the want of truth, the want of moral cleanliness! It is dreadful', she cried, since she had discovered that Sophia was 'utterly false' although she did not wish to injure her. Mr. Browning later, using one of his favourite expressions, declared that Sophia was a 'dunghill of a soul', his description of Home being a dunghill.

How far one of Elizabeth's last poems, *Where's Agnes?*, (i.e. Sophia) throws

light on the affair is for the reader to judge: what is suggested is that it helps us to understand more fully the reasons for Browning's hatred of Home whose influence over Elizabeth clearly tended to strengthen her belief in Sophia's supposed mediumship. Indeed, without some knowledge of the Eckley infatuation certain passages in Browning's *Mr. Sludge, the Medium* are not easy to understand, obscure as that poem is without further mystification.

Now it is well known that at one time Home was suspected of homosexual tendencies. His somewhat effeminate appearance and manners so often noticed were not ones to be overlooked by Browning; and thus his friendship (if it can be called this) with Elizabeth was all the more repulsive. The question—not yet resolved—was whether Browning's loathing of Sophia was a vague feeling (or perhaps even a suspicion) that her love for his wife was of a lesbian nature and that her mediumistic frauds a method of ensnaring her. Was the passage in *Mr. Sludge*

'Tis these hysteric, hybrid half-and-halFs,  
 'Equivocal, worthless vermin yield the fire  
 'We take such as we find them, 'ware their tricks,  
 'Wanting their service.

meant to include not only Home but another half-and-half namely Sophia Eckley? We may never know but some readers may regret that Miss Jenkins did not employ her powers of acute analysis in probing this intriguing mystery. The same might be said of her acceptance of 'old Dr. Doun' (p. 226) in discussing Home's sittings in Scotland in 1870. So far as I know the identity of this person has not hitherto been established and attempts to trace him have not succeeded in spite of inquiries from medical, military and similar sources.

Apart from some of these lesser known episodes relating to Home's manifold activities, one of the most important events in his life was the legal battle between himself and Mrs. Lyon. The author has here contributed a survey of the trial, adding many of the affidavits from the Home witnesses which throw a vivid light on the whole affair and not only the extraordinary behaviour of the 'imperious Mrs. Lyon' (pp. 194 ff) but also on Home's patience and forbearance when confronted by this almost pathological liar on whose testimony little if any reliance could be placed.

In no other work can the true story of the Lyon-Home tangle be read; and it is here that Miss Jenkins has taken advantage of the facts to draw a sketch of Home the man rather than Home the medium. Throughout her book she gives examples of how people who knew him well regarded him and how his vanity, lack of a good education and sometimes an almost childlike simplicity persuaded people that he needed protection when in difficulties since they thought of him as a person of integrity holding firmly to those principles which he thought essential to success in his mission. As the author points out, those who hated him never knew him well but nourished prejudices such as those displayed by Browning, the exact grounds of which have, as has been said, remain rather obscure. The behaviour of others towards him such as displayed by Carpenter and Faraday is more difficult to understand, especially Faraday's conduct and opinions on which Miss Jenkins dryly comments. On the other hand she refrains from adding that however 'contemptible' Faraday may have considered the phenomena said to occur in Home's presence, the latter may have thought Faraday's preachings,

together in all probability with the love-feasts and feet-washings among the Glasites to which odd sect he belonged, might have been considered somewhat surprising to say the least.

As an example of Home's patience with those who attacked him the author has chosen to give brief sketches of two incidents in his life which have been seldom discussed. One of them was the extraordinary hoax of 1857 (pp. 82 ff) which was also touched on by Louis Gardy (*Le Médium D. D. Home*; Paris, 1896, p. 87) and elsewhere. In England the story appeared in the press and stated that a séance had been held in the house of a person officially connected with the Court and among those present was Eugène Guinot, the famous gossip writer, Charles Nadaud, the poet and composer of popular songs and Marshal Baraguay d'Hilliers who, at one time cooperated with Comte Théobald Walsh, Chamberlain at the Tuileries, who in his book *Dunglas Home et le Spiritualisme Américain* (Paris, 1858) does not suggest that the general, if indeed it is the person to whom Walsh refers, was a person likely to take part in a practical joke of this kind which had clearly taken a good deal of organization to carry through successfully. On the other hand Walsh's explanation (*op. cit.* pp. 125 ff.) of Home's phenomena as being due to his remarkable 'magnetic' powers suggest that his views on other matters connected with the occult should be taken with considerable caution.

The other incident briefly mentioned by Miss Jenkins (pp. 162-3) is the story about the activities of a certain 'Captain Douglas Stuart' who, when in America, was said to have formed a circle to witness the paranormal phenomena occurring in his presence which were so remarkable that he was thought by some to be a powerful medium and the circle was known as the Miracle Club. Leaving America 'Captain Stuart' turned up in England; and it soon became known that he was none other than Mr. Edward Askew Sothorn (1826-1882) the comedy actor whose success on the stage was recognized both in America and in England. On his arrival he made friends with a Mr. J. H. Addison and formed a circle for spiritualistic phenomena similar to that he had in New York. In 1865 he was at Scarborough and in August of that year a short account was printed in the *Scarborough Mercury* of the extraordinary phenomena occurring at two of his sittings where it was said that both Sothorn and Addison were levitated, floating round the room like balloons, the manifestations being so startling that, on a lady fainting, the sitting had to be closed.

Now since Sothorn denied that any of his phenomena were genuine, maintaining that Spiritualism was a swindle the same thing applied to the demonstrations by Home and the Davenportes and that his replication of their effects demonstrated the 'imbecility' of Spiritualists and the 'impudent chicanery' of their mediums.

The affair produced a violent controversy, the person most enjoying it probably being Sothorn himself who was known for his propensity for practical jokes.

There seems little doubt that many believed that both Sothorn and Addison were genuine mediums preferring to deny it just in the same way as Davey and Houdini denied they were mediums in later years. How far these claims were justified it is hard to say until some indefatigable student like Miss Jenkins succeeds in discovering some detailed accounts of Sothorn's sittings and the precise conditions under which they were held.

Finally, it may be of some interest to mention the story of Home's alleged confession at the end of his life which Miss Jenkins, I think, has not discussed. It was in 1887 that a book appeared stated to be written by Philip Davis (*La Fin du Monde des Esprits* (Genève, Paris) in which the author stated that, in conversation with him, Home said that he did not believe in spirits and the manifestations with him were not due to them, 'Non, un médium ne peut pas croire aux esprits' he said (p. 288). Since nothing seemed to have been known about Davis inquiries were made; and it was stated that the real author was none other than Louis Jacolliot, the writer on Indian religious beliefs and occult speculations. Louis Gardy in his book, already cited, having heard that this story was being circulated about Home in order to discredit him, decided to ask Mme Home who at that time was living in Geneva and get her reactions. As was to be expected, she denied that there was any truth whatever in the story saying that she really had not got the time to reply to or refute the many absurdities and calumnies which so often appeared.

In her book Miss Jenkins has given a few choice examples of the kind of things of which Mme Home was thinking. The question as to whether Home's phenomena were 'genuine' or not is not one with which the author concerns herself in this book although she doubtless has her own opinions on the matter. It is primarily a defence of one of the most enigmatic and controversial figures of his time and maybe Miss Jenkins, had she read the Phillipics of Demosthenes, might have completed her study by quoting the words of the great Athenian orator, 'When you have heard all the evidence give your decision, but prejudge nothing.'

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THE SECULARISATION OF THE SOUL: Psychical Research in Modern Britain. By John J. Cerullo. Institute for the Study of Human Issues, Philadelphia, 1982. xvi + 194 pages. No price given.

There is apt to be agreement about at least one issue between critics and devotees of psychical research: its profound aesthetic unsatisfactoriness. Why, seeing that there is little if anything that is majestic or beautiful or conceptually elegant about the subject, and since there is neither glory nor success nor wealth to be had in its pursuit, have so many able, fastidious, often celebrated men and women devoted their best energies to promoting it?

Mr. Cerullo attempts an answer in terms of man's deepest motivations. Western culture, especially the Protestant wing, is seen as inexorably driving out the religious concept of the soul, and secularizing, rationalizing, scientising the whole of man's being. He sees psychical research, that is the vision of its founders, particularly Sidgwick, Myers and Gurney as a gallant, nearly successful, bid to present an acceptable Western vision of the secularised soul: however, in the last resort, it was, as he surveys the scene, destined to be