

Dr Dingwall's Casebook

Part One: A Sceptical Enquirer

*Eric John Dingwall, author, anthropologist, librarian, psychic investigator, and, to some, the 'British Kinsey' is less well-known than his erstwhile colleague and sometime adversary, Harry Price, but is a figure of equal interest, says **Christopher Josiffe** (copyright 2013)*

Eric John Dingwall was born in Ceylon in 1890 (or 1891, he was not certain of his actual date of birth). Like Price, he was fortunate enough to have a private income which allowed him to pursue his various interests freely. He studied modern languages at Pembroke College, Cambridge, and honed his librarianship and cataloguing skills whilst employed at the Cambridge University Library between 1915 and 1918. One of his earliest interests was conjuring and stage magic. Having performed his first magic trick aged eight, he joined the Magic Circle in 1909, eventually becoming an honorary Vice President. The secrets and tricks of sleight-of-hand that he learned there proved to be invaluable for his subsequent investigations into séances and mediums. It was as fellow members of the Magic Circle that Dingwall and Price first made another's acquaintance.

Dr Dingwall and Mr Price

Dingwall had joined the Society for Psychical Research in 1920, also holding the post of Director of the American SPR's Department of Physical Phenomena, pertaining to 'physical' mediumship – the manifestation of apports, ectoplasm and pseudopods – as opposed to 'mental' mediumship, or the apparent display of clairvoyance and telepathy. From 1921 to 1927 he sat with various mediums, testing their claims and observing them at close hand. Price, on the other hand, had aligned himself with the London Spiritualist Alliance (LSA), establishing his own National Laboratory of Psychical Research at their London headquarters; this became something of a rival to the SPR (although Price was also an SPR member), and was subsequently the cause of some friction between the two researchers, as numerous letters reveal.

In 1922 Price and Dingwall collaborated in the exposure of the fraudulent 'spirit photographer' William Hope, the star of the Crewe Circle, a group of Spiritualists who sought to demonstrate the reality of the 'Other Side' by means of photographs which ostensibly depicted deceased relatives of

the sitter. Originally based in Cheshire, the Crewe Circle had relocated to London under the auspices of the British College for Psychic Science, of which Price was a member. As Research Officer for the SPR, Dingwall was keen to expose Hope, but needed an accomplice who would be trusted by the Circle. Enter Price, who – by means of photographic glass plates marked by X-Ray – was able to demonstrate that Hope’s method was to swap the plates provided by the sitter with his own, previously created and featuring the images of the ‘spirits’.

The ensuing exposure of the imposture was a worldwide sensation and a success for the SPR. It cemented Price and Dingwall’s friendship, to be further strengthened by their collaboration on the 1922 reissue of *Revelations of a Spirit Medium*. This manual, originally published in 1891, was a guide to those tricks of the trade with which fraudulent mediums fooled the unwary. Dingwall contributed a bibliography and glossary, and, with Price, wrote the introduction and notes. But this friendship was to be sorely tested over the years by Dingwall’s waspish sense of humour, and his suspicions, both of Price’s dubious methods and of his craving for publicity.

Later in 1922, Dingwall was contacted by the German psychic researcher Dr Albert von Schrenk-Notzing who had been testing the gifted Austrian medium Willi Schneider. As an SPR Research Officer, Dingwall was invited to come and see for himself, and in turn invited Price to accompany him. Willi, despite being ‘controlled’ by ropes, and dressed in a séance robe studded with luminous pins, was apparently able to cause objects to move at a distance, produce ectoplasm, and to play an accordion with a spectral and disembodied hand apparently fingering the keys. Willi’s brother Rudi was also able to produce effects that seemingly defied rational explanation. So impressive were these displays that Dingwall, notwithstanding his scepticism, was at first convinced, especially by Willi. Price, however, was –again, at first - more impressed by Rudi’s abilities. Over the years the two researchers vacillated and argued over which brother was genuine and which a faker. In 1929, Dingwall publically described Rudi’s phenomena as dubious, and queried Price’s reliability as an investigator. Price naturally took exception to Dingwall’s having:

written to the *Daily News* stating that Rudi’s tricks were “well known” and drawing attention to my mentality! But no question of my mentality was involved when we saw similar phenomena through Rudi years ago at Muenchen under what amounted to our own conditions. During this last visit of Rudi we got the following “effects” (I purposely refrain from using the word “phenomena”): several hands materialised, large and small, all three-fingered; several masses of luminous substance, which we will call teleplasm;; a handkerchief tied into a tight know; a pseudopod writing on a piece of paper, plainly visible

to all; many levitations of wastepaper basket, bell, table, etc.; a large luminous mass that looked like a young child, trying to push its way through the curtains...

[Letter, HP to EJD, 2 May 1929. SHL, MS912, Box 6, A-H]

Dingwall subsequently argued that Rudi had had a young child as an accomplice, to simulate the phenomena. Further, Dingwall hinted to others that Price himself had been complicit in the deception! Thus, in a letter to Price from Mrs K.M. (Mollie) Goldney, fellow member of the SPR and, apparently, Price's one-time lover [Morris 2006], e.g. p.91]:

Dingwall's theory is that an accomplice from outside came in at every positive séance – not among the sitters who, of course, were changed from sitting to sitting. So far as I can see this WOULD involve complicity on your part – or at least your Secretary's; as it would involve having a duplicate key. [...] Dingwall confined his accusations to Rudi – not Willi. He seems to remain impressed with Willi's phenomena [...] Dingwall says he can't imagine how anyone can remain impressed with Rudi – he thinks it all obvious fraud.

[Letter, Goldney to HP, 25 March 1948. SHL, HPC/4B/84]

In contrast, Price regarded Willi as fraudulent, and, as evidence, offered a photograph purporting to show Willi "totally uncontrolled, holding back a curtain with his right hand" [Letter, HP to EJD, 17 October 1932. SHL, MS 912, Box 6, A-H]; the implication being that Willi, with his hands free, was thus at liberty to fabricate phenomena in the séance room.

Whilst Dingwall had initially been impressed with Willi's performances, he subsequently adopted a more sceptical position:

I have yet to see physical phenomena under proper conditions and I know a great deal about the Schneiders to be deceived by them now. Certainly I did not succeed in discovering Willy's methods when at the SPR, although any attempt to do so was blocked...

[Letter, EJD to HP, 8 May 1929. SHL, MS 912, Box 6, A-H, 58]

One gets the impression that both men - seeking to impress upon each other their respective credentials as serious, scientific researchers - had become somewhat embarrassed about their earlier endorsement of the Schneiders' abilities. Thus, Price responded to Dingwall's letter by stating "I have never said that I was "convinced": I merely reiterate that I should like to see the effects repeated by someone under the same conditions." [Letter, HP to EJD, 10 May 1929, SHL, MS 912. Box 6, A-H, 59]

The bickering continued; when, in 1932, Rudi was brought over to London once again for a further series of séances, Dingwall turned down Price's invitation of collaborating once again:

I [...] have been wondering if you really believe that we could work together [...] Two more differently-minded people it would be hard to find [...] After all you have done your share to blacken my reputation with the Schneiders because I think that I see good evidence of their frauds and maybe an alliance between us would lead to disaster. Besides you like complicated séances with much apparatus and I do not [...] It is a pity because I would dearly like to see one evidential phenomenon with Rudi and not a succession of events dictated by the presence or non-presence of friends in the cabinet and out of it.

[Letter, EJD to HP, 19 January 1932. SHL, MS 912, Box 6, A-H, 97]

Rivalries and Regrets

Other letters from their long correspondence and friendship illustrate that they were not always squabbling. Sometimes Price asked Dingwall for advice, once asking him to recommend "the best copyright man (solicitor) in London" regarding a play currently running in London titled *The Poltergeist*. Apparently the script drew heavily upon Price's Borley Rectory books, without his having given permission, and so he was considering legal action.

[Letter, HP to EJD, 9 October 1946. SHL, MS 912, Box 6, A-I, 234]

Another letter sees Price again asking Dingwall to recommend an expert. This time, Price excitedly informs Dingwall in a letter marked "Strictly Private and Confidential" that

I have at last obtained something that both you and I have been hunting for years – a piece of teleplasm [ectoplasm]! It was obtained, by permission of the "control", from Mrs Duncan [Helen Duncan, the last woman to be prosecuted under the Witchcraft Act, and exposed as a fraud by Harry Price]. It is only a small piece, in distilled water, and I am wondering whether you can recommend someone to me as the best man to analyse it [...] The stuff looks like coagulated albumen – rather like the white of an egg that has been dropped into boiling water, but tougher. I am going to make a preliminary examination [...] You might let me know what you think about it.

[Letter, HP to EJD, 8 January 1931. SHL, MS912, A-H, 84]

Subsequently, and following a series of investigations by his Laboratory, Price was keen to let Dingwall know that he had not been fooled by Helen Duncan and her teleplasm “We gave her five séances here and of course we saw through the whole business at the first séance.” [Letter, HP to EJD, 31 August, 1931. SHL, MS912, A-H, 94]

At various times, the two men expressed regret for having fallen out with each other:

Dear Price, I much enjoyed our talk this afternoon. It quite seemed like old days. I wish we had never had an estrangement. It does seem so mad that the two people who really do know something about the frauds of mediums should be at cross-purposes. I wish you were not quite as you are & I wish I was not quite as I am. But there it is!

[Letter, EJD to HP, 7 October 1929. SHL, MS 912, Box 6, A-H, 66]

Price responded by writing “I, too, regret that we are not working together – and there is no particular reason why we should not. We could even give the SPR a terrific shaking if we really tried!” [Letter, HP to EJD, 12 October 1929. SHL, MS912, box 6, A-H, 67]

And, much later, after the end of WW2, Dingwall would again lament that:

It does seem such a pity that we two can't get together and co-operate. We know more about the general background than anybody in Europe, and have had probably more practical experience. Both of us are barred from the SPR and are suspected by everyone. Is it because the way we look at things is so different that we can never co-operate in any things? Perhaps it is. I don't know. When we are dead – not so long now – there will be just nobody to investigate the physical phenomena. Of course one snag is that you like publicity and I don't. Not that I blame you for it. We all have our likes and dislikes.

[Letter, EJD to HP, 4 January 1946. SHL, MS 912, Box 6, A-I, 221]

The Schneider affair was not the only source of tension between the two men. Price had loaned his extensive library of magical literature to the SPR, at whose offices in Tavistock Square the books were kept. Dingwall undertook to catalogue and supervise the use of the collection, but this caused a certain amount of friction between them. In April 1923, Price found himself forced to respond to Dingwall's teasing remarks that his library was not of interest to SPR members: “You say that only three books have been taken out from my collection. Is that the fault of the members or of the books?” [Letter, EJD to HP, 2 April 1923. SHL, MS912 Box 6, A-H, 25]

Later, and by way of getting his own back, Price took the opportunity to upbraid Dingwall, admonishing him about the state of the collection entrusted to his care:

I called in to-day to put some periodicals away, and found that the Dec. No. of the *Magic Wand* (No.124) is missing. I shall be glad if you will have a look for it. The place is in a great muddle, dusty, and those newly-bound vols. of the *Psychic Magazine* are faded at the tops [...] Do try to have a clear up.

[Letter, HP to EJD, 25 February 1925. SHL, MS912, Box 6, A-H, 40]

It is evident that Dingwall liked to tease his erstwhile colleague; thus, in 1935, when Price had been investigating Gef, the 'talking mongoose' of the Isle of Man, Dingwall wrote: "...how is the mongoose which speaks English? I hope what he says is more sensible than what spiritualists say. As ever, D." [Letter, EJD to HP, 13 July 1935. SHL, MS912, A-H, 161a] Price was keen to reassure Dingwall know that he had always been a sceptic as far as Gef was concerned:

It is curious you should mention Jef [sic], the "Talking Mongoose", as I am going to the I.O.M. on Tues. 30th. I have received samples of Jef's hair, from which I have had photomicrographs prepared. The expert (zoo) says they belong to a dog! How can people be so distrustful?"

[Letter, HP to EJD, 15 July 1925. SHL, MS912, Box 6, A-H, 162]

Incognito Investigations

Dingwall's investigative methods were arguably more rigorous than those of Price. Unlike his media-friendly associate, Dingwall sought to keep his appearance a secret, the better to attend séances incognito, despite his being a well-known figure in paranormal research circles. Thus, in a 1949 article for *The Strand Magazine* ('We ask Dr Dingwall Twenty Questions on Clairvoyance, Telepathy, Dreams, Magic, and Ghosts') a photograph of Dingwall's hand beside a bookshelf, reaching for a book, was captioned:

HAND OF A MAN WHO CAN'T BE PHOTOGRAPHED. No photograph of Dr Dingwall's face has been published for nearly twenty years. As he spends much of his time getting evidence on fake mediums and fraudulent "healers," he is understandably anxious not to be recognised when he goes to séances and meetings. But he allowed us to photograph his hand reaching into the shelves marked "Ghosts" in his vast library in Cambridge.

[*Strand*, p.67]

The *Strand Magazine* piece gives some indications of Dingwall's sceptical position on the paranormal; thus, in response to being asked about the veracity of 'second sight', he answered:

Second sight is a vague term. There are many recorded instances of apparently remarkable cases of second sight, telepathy, and clairvoyance. But in none so far has there been incontrovertible proof of supernormal powers. Scientific tests to establish some proof could be made to-day, but in the last fifteen years hardly anybody has turned up to try to pass the tests. We're still waiting...

[*Strand*, p.66-67]

Nevertheless, describing a recent experiment into telepathy conducted by Dutch psychologists, he was prepared to acknowledge that "the results were far better than the laws of chance allowed, and it is not easy to say how they can be described in terms of normality. In fact the evidence for telepathy of this kind is now piling up." [*Strand*, p.67-68]

Dingwall did not claim that all practitioners of mediumship, clairvoyance and the like were frauds - but neither did he discount the possibility of self-delusion: "I have met many people who are quite sincere, but at the same time are honestly mistaken in thinking they have supernatural powers."

[*Strand* p.70] Elsewhere, in his *How to go to a Medium: a Manual of Instruction* he argued that mediums were often psychologically-disordered individuals: "mediums as a class [...] are very easily dissociated in a much more pronounced way than is usual with normal people." [Dingwall 1927, p.3]

The book was intended to be a practical guide for novice investigators or sitters: "Before a person goes to consult or experiment with a medium, it would be as well for him to know something of the elements of psychology, so that he may have some acquaintance of the processes at work."

[Dingwall 1927, p.1] He goes on to explain, in layman's terms, how the unconscious mind and the process of dissociation may often be responsible for such phenomena as automatic writing, and information received by means of the Ouija board or similar devices:

The main point to remember is that in these automatic processes, the subject's own mind is at work and the results obtained can often be seen to be a product of his own subconscious mind, by which is meant simply that part of his mental processes which lies beneath the threshold of consciousness.

[Dingwall 1927, p.4]

Dingwall also advised the investigator or 'sitter' to wear "nothing distinctive, such as clerical garb, mourning, nurse's uniform or livery" [Dingwall 1927, p.16] for fear of these offering clues to a medium using a 'cold reading' method. Similarly, if the medium were to say (for example): "I see a gentleman standing by you and hear the name John. I think it is your father", Dingwall cautioned the sitter not to reply "No, it is my grandfather" as "that is giving the medium wholly gratuitous information." Instead, he advised the sitter to respond with something like: "Yes, go on, I should like to hear some more about the gentleman." [Dingwall 1927, p.16-17]

An essential piece of equipment used by Dingwall for his investigations was his "Box of necessities for haunting and poltergeist investigations." This contained, amongst other items, a compass, cotton thread to 'control' the medium by connecting their arms or legs to those of the investigator, and luminous pins. These could then be attached to the medium's clothing, so that any arm or leg movements could be detected in the darkness of the séance room.

Dingwall was regarded by other SPR members as something of an *enfant terrible*; he frequently fell out with colleagues who, he felt, were not applying sufficiently rigorous investigative methods. His own specific area of interest was 'physical' mediumship, but some leaders of the Society thought the evidence for such phenomena dubious at best, if not fraudulent. Accordingly, Dingwall swiftly became a controversial figure in the Society. He retaliated by arguing that his critics did not apply the same high standards when assessing 'mental' phenomena, particularly when produced by non-professional mediums from the higher echelons of society.

An SPR colleague and friend, Alan Gauld, stated that Dingwall "could be difficult, and occasionally prickly, cantankerous or somewhat aggressive", but felt that these characteristics should be distinguished from those arising from his dry sense of humour, as when he enquired of a Spiritualist lecturer, "Tell me, does a tape worm survive death?" [Gauld 1987, p. 235]

Dingwall doubted that the majority of investigators were motivated by a genuine desire to discover the truth or falsity behind alleged psychic phenomena; instead, he suspected them to be merely seeking supporting evidence for their pre-existent beliefs in Spiritualism, or of other occult tenets. They were therefore unwilling to accept that fraud and deception were frequent factors. Dingwall was different. He noted that "my attitude is always characterized as the limit of cynicism. But I think I know my fellow mortals pretty well and the motivation which inspires them!" [Letter, EJD to HP, 1 February 1939. SHL, HPC/4B/54] So reluctant was he to acknowledge any phenomena as being proof

positive of the paranormal that some Society members concluded Dingwall to be an utter sceptic, citing his remarks after having attended a séance and witnessing the table move - apparently of its own volition: "I didn't do that. You didn't do that. Hallucination. Must have been." [Gauld 1987, p.234] A phrase uttered by Dingwall - upon learning of, or witnessing, some seemingly paranormal occurrence - became a familiar one to his friends and associates: "Most extraordinary. I've no doubt that there is a rational explanation." [Playfair 2012]

But it is untrue to say that he had never experienced anything genuinely inexplicable. He was perplexed by the pseudopod which appeared during a sitting given by the medium Stella C, and was also unable to explain a cold wind which he experienced when alone with Eva C in her cabinet. And in his later years, at his own home at Crowhurst, East Sussex, he was witness to some strange phenomena: the appearance of a phantasmal flowered dress, a figure in a cloak, and a sense of unease, causing him to leave the room. When he moved to another flat at St. Leonards-on-Sea, the phenomena continued.