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MR HALL AND THE S.P.R.

by ALAN GAULD

THE main argument of Trevor H. Hall's latest book on the early days of Psychical Research, *The Strange Case of Edmund Gurney*,¹ is as follows. Edmund Gurney, though of manic-depressive tendencies, was much too sensible a man to have taken up Psychical Research under normal circumstances, but the failure of his ambitions as musician, lawyer and doctor left him without an outlet for his enormous intellectual energies, and ready to listen to Frederic Myers's persuasive suggestions that he should devote himself to the new subject. Together Myers and Gurney carried out the experiments on thought-transference, described and illustrated in *Proceedings* 1, 1883, pp. 78-97, 161-167, 175-215, for which Douglas Blackburn acted as agent and G. A. Smith as percipient. Many years later, in 1908 and 1911, Blackburn confessed that he and Smith had tricked Gurney and Myers; but Smith, who had passed some years in the employ of the S.P.R., denied it. During his period of employment with the S.P.R. Smith was also used by Gurney as hypnotist for experiments on thought-transference under hypnosis; Smith supplied the subjects for these experiments, and almost certainly deceived Gurney still further. In June 1888, at Brighton, Gurney obtained conclusive proof of Smith's duplicity. In despair at the ruin of his work, Gurney chloroformed himself, leaving behind a note for his friend, Dr Arthur Myers. Arthur Myers was summoned to Brighton, and he and his brother Frederic conspired together to concoct a tale which dissuaded the coroner's jury from returning a verdict of suicide.

¹ Duckworth, London, 1964. 25s.

Mr Hall uses this story as a platform for what is probably the fiercest attack ever launched upon the competence, and even the honesty, of the early leaders of the S.P.R. It is odd that he should cherish such violent hostility towards people who have been in their graves for so many years.

There is no doubt about Mr Hall's skill in presenting his case. He resorts too often to certain rather tiresome phrases ('the reader will have observed', 'the reader will no doubt wonder', 'the reader may think it curious', 'the sensible reader'); but apart from that his style is in general persuasive, and his arrangement of material lucid and orderly.

Probably the most original, and certainly the most interesting, parts of the book are those concerned with that remarkable pair Smith and Blackburn. In tracing their careers, Mr Hall must have put in many hours of work over the files of local newspapers and in Somerset House, and what he has found out makes one wish that he had found out more. The rest of the book, however, is less appealing, and, despite the numerous references and footnotes, the overall impression left behind is one of insubstantiality. This impression arises partly from the fact that so little is known of the book's central figure, Edmund Gurney; Mr Hall's account of his life and character has, *faute de mieux*, to rely heavily on no more recondite a source than Croom Robertson's article in the *Dictionary of National Biography*. But the impression arises *mostly* from the fact that so many of the book's chief contentions are supported only by circumstantial evidence. There is of course direct evidence that Smith and Blackburn duped Gurney and Myers; but the other points in the main plot—that Smith and Blackburn deliberately baited a trap for the S.P.R. leaders; that Smith subsequently deceived Gurney again and again; that Smith's sister eventually informed Gurney of the truth; that Gurney committed a carefully planned suicide; that Arthur and Frederic Myers concocted a story to satisfy the coroner's jury—all these are read into known facts rather than directly established by them. Mr Hall uses words and phrases like 'significantly', 'significant that', 'of significance', 'curious' with a revealing frequency; he sees significances everywhere, and he would not have to do so if the facts he is concerned with spoke for themselves. Of course he may well be right in some or all of his surmises; but a book of this kind can accommodate only a certain amount of surmise without being lifted clear of the good, firm ground, and Mr Hall seems to me to be on the point of take-off.

One might, indeed, wonder if, at this distance of time, the questions whether Smith and Blackburn hoodwinked the S.P.R.,

and whether Edmund Gurney committed suicide, can possibly have sufficient importance to justify the publication of a book about them. Mr Hall would perhaps reply as follows. These questions may not today be important in themselves, but a discussion of them serves to bring out the incompetence, gullibility and even dishonesty of the early leaders of the S.P.R., and hence to undermine the whole fabric of their work—which has, of course, served as the foundation for most of what has subsequently been done in the same field.

Now the early leaders of the S.P.R. had doubtless faults of character, and certainly they made mistakes. But, if they had faults, they also had considerable virtues and considerable abilities, and if they made mistakes, they also learned from them. Mr Hall, however, though quick to seize upon any point which he can turn to the discredit of the Society's early leaders, is far less ready to note points which tell in their favour, or which counteract the criticisms he wishes to advance. Indeed his anxiety to show the Society up is so great that it leads him to be most regrettably uncritical in handling and interpreting his source material. I shall try to justify this assertion by some examples, which will perhaps best be grouped under four headings.

I. THE SMITH-BLACKBURN EXPERIMENTS;

Mr Hall is by no means the first critic of the Society to make capital out of Blackburn's confession. Hitherto the situation has been that Blackburn's confession together with the suspicions of Sir James Crichton-Browne (one of the witnesses of the experiments) can be balanced against Smith's denials and Miss Alice Johnson's pamphlet vindicating him; so that people have been free to make up their minds on the issue more or less in accordance with their predispositions as to whether or not telepathy is possible. Mr Hall undoubtedly tilts the scales Blackburn's way by sketching in (for the first time) the background of showmanship against which the Smith-Blackburn performances must be judged, and he is clearly right in regarding Miss Johnson's answer as unsatisfactory. But he also claims (and this is much more important) to have discovered two new pieces of more direct evidence that Smith and Blackburn hoodwinked Gurney and Myers. Neither of these pieces of evidence will stand up to scrutiny.

The more important of these (pp. 128-130) is as follows. In 1884 Blackburn published a little book, now extremely scarce, called *Thought Reading: or, Modern Mysteries Explained*. In this book he refers to the *Proceedings* reports of the Smith-Blackburn

experiments, without, however, disclosing his own participation in them. To quote Mr Hall (p. 129):

'He . . . specifically stated that these trials had failed to establish the existence of thought-reading, without giving a reason, and added that "satisfactory evidence has yet to be produced in support of the assumption that it is within the power of one man to tell in effect the nature of an abstract idea or intention occupying the mind of another". . . . These remarks by Blackburn in 1884 seem to me to be of the highest significance in relation to the later controversy over his "confession" in 1908 and 1911.'

Blackburn's remarks, however, taken in their context, are by no means so incriminating as Mr Hall seems to think. On page 28 of his booklet Blackburn defines thought-reading as 'the power of one person to divine the actual abstract thoughts passing through the mind of another'. He then says (pp. 28-29) 'That there are instances which suggest the existence of something very akin to such a power is beyond dispute; but these are isolated and rare. When the power is found to exist, it is almost invariably in the case of two persons united by an intense mental sympathy. Even then, more often than not, the phenomenon takes the form of a species of *clairvoyance*, or *introvision*, by which scenes and objects vividly impressed upon the brain or optic nerve of one are more or less distinctly seen by the other.' It is as an illustration of 'this class of transferred mental pictures' that Blackburn cites the experiments in which he took part, and when he says that they fail 'to establish actual thought-reading' he is clearly just making the point that evidence for the transference of mental pictures does not constitute evidence for thought-reading as defined above, i.e. for someone's divining the abstract thoughts passing through another person's mind. Blackburn's conclusion about these questions (p. 32) is that "Thus far both theory and practice in this interesting field of speculative research combine in lending weight and authority to the assertion that "Will is a force, and sensation transferable."'

Mr Hall's further suggestion (p. 130) that the leaders of the S.P.R. deliberately excluded Blackburn's book from their Library, and his veiled hint (pp. 130-131) that they bought up and destroyed whatever copies of it they could lay hands on, hardly require comment.

The other new piece of evidence which Mr Hall adduces (pp. 58n., 120-121, 129) is a letter from Sir Oliver Lodge to J. G. Piddington, dated 5th December, 1908. Lodge said that Gurney had detected the code practised by Smith and Blackburn. On one occasion Blackburn failed to make it clear to Smith that tests with

numbers were being replaced by tests with pictures, and a picture of a cat was divined by Smith as 3, 1, 20.

It is very difficult to suppose that the incident recollected by Lodge took place during any of the Smith-Blackburn experiments. The drawings used in these experiments are preserved in the Society's archives, and a picture of a cat is not amongst them. Furthermore, numbers were 'transmitted' *only* during the first series of experiments (*Proc.*, I, 79), and in this series no meaningful drawings were used, the figures being mostly of such a character that their shapes 'could not easily be conveyed in words'. There does not seem to have been any point in any of the series of experiments at which such an incident *could* have occurred.

2. GURNEY'S 'SUICIDE' AND THE PLOT TO COVER IT UP

There were undoubtedly some curious features about Gurney's death—enough to make his friends fear that he might have committed suicide. But Mr Hall's view of the supposed suicide will not stand up to examination. Mr Hall suggests (pp. 191-192) that when Gurney found out that Smith was a cheat he realized that his own papers must be withdrawn, and that his friends, and the S.P.R., would be held up to ridicule. He felt himself responsible. Perhaps he had also promised his informant that he would not reveal his knowledge. Death offered a 'partial solution of his intolerable problem'. So Gurney chloroformed himself, leaving behind a letter for Arthur Myers subtly hinting at what had happened.

Arthur and Frederic Myers conspired together to concoct a story for the Inquest (pp. 1-26). The story was as follows. Gurney had for some years been liable to acute facial neuralgia, and had been accustomed to use narcotics to relieve pain and procure sleep. Arthur Myers and Gurney's brother Alfred testified at the Inquest to that effect. Arthur Myers added (p. 15) that Gurney had discussed with him 'the use of chloroform in small doses for the relief of pain', but he had no certain knowledge that he had ever used it. As a result of this testimony the jury found that Gurney died accidentally through taking an overdose of chloroform to relieve pain.

Now *if* Gurney took his own life, he must surely have done so out of black despair, and not from any careful plan to save his colleagues from ridicule whilst keeping a promise to his informant to maintain silence. How *could* suicide have seemed likely to save the situation? If he had killed himself without informing his colleagues of Smith's duplicity, he would have left them unwittingly

harbouring a traitor whose exposure might at any moment make them a laughing-stock. And if he had killed himself *after* informing them (however subtly), he would have been leaving them to clear up the mess for which he believed himself responsible—a piece of moral cowardice of which he would not have been capable. In either event his suicide would certainly have left the informant to whom he is supposed to have promised secrecy in a very awkward situation.

Nor does it seem in the least plausible that Arthur and Frederic Myers conspired with Gurney's brother Alfred to concoct for the coroner the story about Gurney's neuralgia, sleeplessness and use of narcotic medicines. Mr Hall presents a number of reasons for supposing the story to be false, but none of them are convincing, and some of them, for instance the suggestion on page 21 that Gurney could not have carried out so much work as he did if he had suffered acutely from neuralgia (an attack of neuralgia is often the *result* of overwork), and the suggestion on pp. 19–20 that had Gurney been liable to neuralgia he must have mentioned the fact in a paper which describes, *inter alia*, how Smith cured one of their hypnotic subjects of a toothache, verge on the ludicrous.

Mr Hall's more serious arguments are: that in 1954 Smith told Dr E. J. Dingwall that Gurney never suffered from neuralgia, and that, as Gurney's secretary, he, Smith would have known if he had (pp. 19, 173); that Miss Helen Gurney, Edmund Gurney's daughter, says that her mother 'totally disagreed with Dr Myers's evidence in regard to her husband's alleged use of drugs' (p. 21n.); and that I have told him that there is 'no indication whatsoever among the correspondence of the S.P.R. leaders that Gurney was in the habit of taking opiates or that he suffered from neuralgia' (p. 19). Now with regard to the first of these arguments, it really is very difficult to see why testimony given to Dr Dingwall by Gurney's deceitful secretary, sixty years and more after the events concerned, and during a break from mowing his lawn, should be preferred to contemporary testimony given under oath by a respected physician, intimately acquainted with Gurney, and by Gurney's brother Alfred, a man of outstanding piety. And with regard to the second argument, one must surely bear in mind that there could well be things about himself which any man might not wish his wife (or his secretary) to know, and that a habit of taking drugs could certainly be one of them. As for the third argument—I sincerely hope that I was not guilty of making such a sweeping assertion. It is true that I have never *seen* such references, but then I have not found more than ten letters which give even a small amount of information about Gurney's private life, and the

fact that none of them mention his neuralgia and use of opiates can hardly be of even the slightest significance. Indeed, since Gurney undoubtedly suffered from bouts of depression, and since insomnia is one of the commonest symptoms of depression, it would be strange if, as a man of medical training, he did not from time to time resort to drugs to procure sleep.

If Dr Myers *had* wished to fabricate a story about Gurney's neuralgia and use of chloroform—one which would with certainty have exonerated him from suspicion of suicide—he could easily have told a far more convincing tale than in fact he did. Chloroform can be used in three ways to relieve neuralgic (and other) pains. It can be taken internally in small doses; it can be inhaled as a general anaesthetic or analgesic; or it can be applied locally as a counter-irritant. Dr Myers said at the Inquest. 'Deceased had often discussed with him the use of chloroform in small doses for the relief of pain. Witness had often spoken of the danger of it and he had no certain knowledge that he had ever used chloroform' (p. 15). From this very cautious statement it is not even clear which mode of administering chloroform had been discussed (though on page 23 Mr Hall magnifies Dr Myers's remarks into the suggestion that 'Gurney was regularly inhaling chloroform to relieve unbearable neuralgic pains and insomnia'). Now when chloroform is inhaled as a general anaesthetic or analgesic the sufferer usually *breathes through* a linen or gauze pad which has been sprinkled with it; but when it is used locally as a counter-irritant it is best applied on a pad of linen or cotton wool backed with some impermeable substance, such as oil-cloth or india-rubber, to prevent dispersion. Gurney was found lying on his left side with his sponge bag pressed by his right hand over his nose and mouth. Under the sponge bag was some cotton wool. These facts are quite consistent with his having used a local application of chloroform to relieve right-sided facial or trigeminal neuralgia (an attack of which, incidentally, could well have been precipitated by his receiving an emotional shock of some kind). If he had fallen asleep his right hand might have slipped fully over his nose and mouth. Had Dr Myers wished to cover up suicide in a convincing way he could simply have said that Gurney generally used a local application of chloroform to relieve neuralgia; this treatment was commonly recommended in medical books of the time, and resorting to it would not have carried any sort of stigma. Yet Dr Myers said nothing of the kind; maintaining, indeed, that he had no certain knowledge that Gurney had ever used chloroform.

3. THAT GURNEY WAS THE VICTIM OF HIS ASSOCIATION WITH THE S.P.R.

Gurney is the only one of the early leaders of the S.P.R. for whom Mr Hall has much admiration; indeed his admiration for him is very nearly unqualified. Gurney's misfortunes cannot, Mr Hall thinks, be laid at his own door; they were the results of his trusting reliance upon unworthy associates—to wit the other leaders of the S.P.R. The contortions which Mr Hall goes through in sustaining this view are sometimes almost bizarre. For instance he points out, quite rightly, that the *Third Report on Thought Transference (Proc., I, 161-215)*, which describes experiments with Smith and Blackburn, is a very inadequate production. But he is so reluctant to believe that Gurney could have had a hand in anything unsatisfactory that he suggests (p. 106) that Gurney must have entered one of his depressive phases at the time when the *Third Report* had to be written. Podmore, whose name appears for the first time as a member of the thought-transference committee listed at the head of this report, was probably recruited to the committee to replace the disabled Gurney 'for the specific purpose of actively assisting in the preparation of the third report', and was doubtless responsible for its shortcomings.

These arguments are entirely wide of the mark. The footnote to p. 161 of Vol. I of *Proceedings* makes it clear that Podmore was the only one of the four members of the committee on Thought-transference who was not 'specially responsible' for the composition of the *Third Report*. And he was certainly not recruited to the committee to write up the experiments on Gurney's behalf during the latter's illness. Podmore was elected to the committee at the Council meeting of 20th January 1883. The final experiments with Smith and Blackburn were carried out on 20th, 21st and 23rd April, 1883 (the dates are on the pictures), and Gurney undoubtedly took an active part in them, for some of the drawings have contemporary annotations in his handwriting. The report was read to the Society on 24th April, i.e. the day after the final experiments, and no deeper explanation of its deficiencies seems required than that parts of it had to be prepared in extreme haste.

4. THE CREDULITY OF THE EARLY LEADERS OF THE S.P.R.

Mr Hall is as uncritical in accepting evidence which supposedly impugns the characters and capabilities of the other leaders of the early S.P.R. as he is in accepting evidence which supposedly deflects criticism from Gurney's shoulders to theirs. It seems, in

most cases, never to occur to him even to *look* for facts which might tell against whatever point he is trying to make.

For instance he remarks on page 42 that 'it seems impossible to believe that persons who were not actually mentally deranged could even momentarily consider' that the physical phenomena of Spiritualism might be genuine. The reason why the S.P.R.'s early leaders were prepared to consider the possibility was their 'credulous and obsessive wish to believe' and their 'entire lack of knowledge of deceptive methods'. As an example he cites W. S. Moses, one of the Society's first Vice-Presidents, who suggested in 1877 that certain conjurors were really mediums who concealed their powers.

Now it really is most unkind of Mr Hall to saddle the early leaders of the S.P.R. *en bloc* with Moses's extreme credulity in the matter of physical phenomena and conjuring. He fails to point out the mitigating circumstance that in 1886 Moses resigned his Vice-Presidency, his membership of the Council and his membership of the Society, precisely because other, and predominant, leaders of the Society expressed the belief that certain supposed instances of physical phenomena were produced by clever conjuring. Moses, in fact, deprecated their views almost as strongly as some present-day Spiritualists deprecate Mr Hall's.

Again, still castigating the leaders of the Society for their credulity about physical phenomena, Mr Hall says (p. 48) 'It is of interest to read' on page 43 of a pamphlet by T. S. Henry, that Mrs Mellon, a physical medium once tested by Myers, Gurney and the Sidgwicks, and subsequently caught in trickery, referred inquirers to tests given before Sidgwick, Myers, Balfour and Stewart. Why is it not also of interest to read on page 72 of the same pamphlet that 'Mr. Myers has been communicated with in reference to these much-talked-of tests, and a reply received to the effect that the London Society was not satisfied'?

As another illustration of the credulity of the Society's early leaders, Mr Hall makes great play (pp. 65-68) with the famous story of the Hornby apparition, which was first printed in *Proceedings* for May 1884. Sir Edmund Hornby, formerly Chief Judge of the Supreme Consular Court of China, stated that at twenty past one one morning during his residence in Shanghai some years previously he had been in bed with his wife when a newspaper reporter known to him came in and requested an advance copy of a written judgment to appear in the next day's paper. Sir Edmund complied, and Lady Hornby (who confirmed the facts so far as she was cognizant of them) was awakened by the conversation. On arrival at court, Sir Edmund learned that the

reporter concerned had died before half past one that morning. An account of this story was printed in *The Nineteenth Century* for July 1884, and was seen in Shanghai by a newspaper editor, Mr F. H. Balfour. According to Mr Hall, Balfour wrote to the editor of *The Nineteenth Century* 'pointing out that the whole tale was a tissue of errors and imagination, which bore little resemblance to the facts' (p. 67).

Mr Hall exaggerates, however. Balfour did not commit himself to any such statement, either in his letter to *The Nineteenth Century* or in his much fuller criticism of the case in the *North-China Herald* for 15th August, 1884. What he *did* do was to indicate, rather slyly, 'just a few curious points which ought to be cleared up'. In his *North-China Herald* article he mentioned seven such points, but there is in fact only one which carries much weight, the point, namely, that the reporter's sudden death took place about three months before Hornby's (third) marriage. After that observation, which had apparently been overlooked by everyone, including Hornby himself, it was clearly desirable to give inquisitive people no further occasion to comment, and Gurney did the right thing in withdrawing from *Proceedings* (at Hornby's request) a story which had already received a fair amount of publicity. Hornby, however, did not retract a word of his narrative.

Many of the issues discussed in this review may seem unbearably trivial. I can only plead in extenuation that Mr Hall builds up his case against the early leaders of the Society chiefly by the accumulation of trivial (though misplaced) allegations, of which those actually dealt with above are a few examples. The charges which he makes are so frequently unjustified, and his presentation of them is so uniformly misleading, that his views cannot command the attention which his skill as a writer would otherwise win for them.

STUDIES IN THE AUTOMATIC WRITING OF MRS VERRALL

II. ON THE BANKS OF THE DERWENT

by G. W. LAMBERT

(References in the form 'p.' followed by a number are to pages in *Proceedings* 20. References by number only at the end of a sentence are to notes at end of this article.)

THE following study is based on scripts which Mrs Verrall published, with comments, in *Proceedings*, 20 (October 1906).