

Dr Dingwall's Casebook

Part Two: 'Dirty Ding'

*Eric John Dingwall, author, anthropologist, librarian, psychic investigator, was also known to some as the 'British Kinsey' due to his interest in the nature of sex. It was an interest, though, that brought him into conflict with his fellow psychical researchers, says **Christopher Josiffe** (copyright 2013)*

Eric Dingwall had long been a source of some dismay amongst his colleagues at the Society for Psychical Research (SPR) on account of his interest in the peculiarities of human behaviour, particularly in the realm of sex. It was even said that he had aroused the displeasure of some of these colleagues by displaying a curiosity about their own sex lives. Although it is unclear exactly why the Society refused to renew his Research Officer status in 1927, one suggestion is that "certain of Dingwall's publications (those on sexual subjects) had not been altogether agreeable to some members of the Council." [Gauld 1987, p.233] But his interest in this area was a serious one - just as he had regarded some mediums as being psychological abnormal, Dingwall argued for a connection between mediumistic ability and a strong sexual drive.

Thus, in one chapter of his *Very Peculiar People* [Dingwall 1950], he looks at the Italian medium, Eusapia Palladino, who had been examined by SPR representatives in Naples in 1908. Dingwall commented that she was: "...an unlettered peasant, retaining, as one writer put it, 'a most primitive mentality,' and of such a decidedly erotic nature that it was said that she thought of little else." [Dingwall 1950, p.190]. Apparently, before her sittings, Palladino's pulse rate increased to 120, and her facial expressions "sometimes took on a demoniacal mein" but then changed

into an expression which could only be described as one of voluptuous ecstasy, and which was often accompanied by movements and a brilliance of eye and smile of contentment which must have been singularly disconcerting to diffident sitters...after sittings...she would sometimes, in a half-dreamy state, throw herself into the arms of men attending the séance and signify her desire for more intimate contacts in ways which could hardly be misinterpreted [...]

[Dingwall 1950, p.190]

Dingwall seemed to derive some wry amusement at the thought of Palladino, the earthy Neapolitan peasant, having come into contact with the unworldly and donnish SPR investigators. Palladino was

one of a very few mediums whose performances, Dingwall felt, could not be dismissed as fraud or deception, others being Daniel Dunglas Home, and - initially - Willi Schneider.

The 'Margery' Affair

One of Dingwall's own cases – that of the 'Margery mediumship' – saw the medium divesting herself of her outer clothing, and appearing in "a thick woollen bath-robe and stockings." One of the most striking aspects of the Margery sittings was the medium's apparent ability to produce a 'telesplasmic' hand-like form from various parts of her body, including – allegedly - her vagina. Perhaps this case appealed to Dingwall, not only on account of its being a case of 'physical' mediumship, but also because of its somewhat bizarre sex aspects.

Mina Crandon, the wife of a Boston physician and socialite, used the pseudonym 'Margery', and claimed that she was in regular contact with her dead brother Walter. Her séances became highly popular amongst Boston's high society, on account of the astonishing manifestations therein: direct voice, apports, ectoplasm, and telekinesis. The voice, supposedly that of Walter, seemed to emanate from somewhere behind Mina, sometimes appearing to come from a weird disembodied hand which Mina materialized, claiming it was her dead brother's hand.

In 1923 she visited Europe and gave a sitting at the SPR for Dingwall. He was impressed by what appeared to be the levitation of a (supposedly) fraud-proof table, and described the phenomena as "very striking and, if fraudulent, involved some skill in performance" [Dingwall 1928, p.80] Dingwall attended further sittings, in Boston in 1926. The phenomena reputed to be on show were: raps and knocks; lights; scents; sounds of musical instruments; trance-writing in nine languages; furniture moving around; apports of roses and of a live pigeon; the voice of 'Walter;' appearance of teleplasm; and telekinesis of objects, moved by the teleplasmic 'hand.'

This 'hand' can be seen in some of the photographs from the sittings, which were taken under red light. One of the Crandons' conditions was that the lights not be switched on by any of the investigators, unless 'Walter' had given permission; another was that during the series of 29 sittings, after each session, the investigators' notes be passed to Mina's husband Dr Crandon. Still another stipulation was that Dr Crandon could be involved in the physical 'control' of his wife's hands and feet – thus, Dingwall writes that "the control varied throughout the sitting; sometimes I had Margery's left hand and both feet, sometimes both hands and both feet, or again both hands and one foot." [Dingwall 1928, p.91]

Dingwall was criticized by some in the SPR for having acceded to the Crandons' demands; but he noted that:

In accepting these conditions I was fully aware of their shortcomings and of the criticisms which could so easily be levelled against them. But it seemed better to accept what was offered than to commence the series by objections and refusals.

[Dingwall 1928, p.90]

He argued that had he insisted on the séances being conducted on his own terms, there would have been no sittings - or, instead, sittings but no phenomena. Dingwall's report on the series of séances offers two hypotheses; the first hypothesis being that the sittings presented some genuinely "supernormal" phenomena; and the second, that trickery was involved. He seemed to vacillate between the two positions, and 'Walter' himself, during one séance, remarked that "Dingwall is sitting on the fence waiting to see which way to jump. Unfortunately, however, for Dingwall, the fence is rotten, and he is going to get a nasty spill."

[Letter, Richardson to EJD, 21 May 1926. SHL, MS912, Box 7, A-K]

The teleplasmic hand is arguably the most bizarre aspect of the 'Margery' sittings – whether genuine or faked. Here are some of Dingwall's notes from sitting number 7:

In ten minutes rustling in Psyche's [i.e. Margery's] lap. Thought a mass of substance was in Psyche's lap. Walter then directed my palm to be put up on middle of table, near the edge. Then for five minutes – palm struck by cool, clammy apparently disc-like object; on repeated flicks being given to my hand. I noticed that the shape of the object was constantly changing. It appeared to lengthen and to widen, and occasionally parts appeared to be thickened, as if some internal mechanism was causing a swelling in parts of the mass. At times two distinct pressures at least were felt, the sensation being as if crude, clammy, unformed fingers were pressing both the lower portions of my fingers, and also the upper at the same time. This pressure was sometimes increased to 2½-3 pounds, and when the substance was drawn from the hand it always appeared to be slightly viscous.

[Dingwall 1928, p.107]

Elsewhere, in Dingwall's report on the 6th sitting - where he witnessed the disembodied hand-like form with its "large, clumsy fingers", and felt once again the "cold, viscous, clammy material" touch his hand – he posits the validity of the first or 'supernormal' hypothesis. He compared the teleplasmic substance to similar matter ostensibly produced by other mediums - Kathleen Goligher,

Eva Carrière, and, most notably, the “rude, claw-like terminals” observed in Willi Schneider’s séances. But - adopting the second hypothesis - Dingwall insists that “we have no right to assume that all these appearances [i.e. of ‘Walter’s’ clammy hand] *were the same object.*” [Dingwall 1928, p.105] Given that the Crandons had not been intimately searched, it was possible that either or both had brought certain objects into the room. The inference was that Margery had concealed the substance or substances internally. Another of the observers, Professor William McDougall, noted that the teleplasmic ‘hand’ closely resembled animal lung tissue.

Dingwall concluded that the Margery case was unlike those of Willi Schneider or Eusapia Palladino. Of these latter two, he wrote, “I cannot conceive *any* normal explanation for what has been observed; and it is precisely for that reason that in these two cases I adopt the first hypothesis.” [Dingwall 1928, p.153] With regard to the Margery affair, since it was possible that normal means had been employed to simulate the phenomena, he was inclined towards the second hypothesis. This was not the same as saying that the Crandons had been caught out using trickery; merely, that their refusal to undergo more strict controls meant that the suspicion of imposture was impossible to rule out. As for motive, Dingwall remained puzzled, suggesting only that Dr Crandon, as a man of science, might have wished to discredit Spiritualism by faking the phenomena over a period of time. But if this was the motive, Dr Crandon would presumably have revealed the truth at a later date; and he is not known to have done so.

Anthropologist and Collector

Partly as a result of his estrangement with the SPR, Dingwall became disenchanted with the whole field of psychic investigation; indeed, towards the end of his life, he often remarked that he wished he had not devoted so much time to the paranormal. It was during this period of disenchantment in the mid-to-late-1920s that he became increasingly interested in anthropology; perhaps finding in this discipline the scientific rigour he felt was lacking in psychical research. To this end, he was enrolled as a PhD student at the University of London between 1925 and 1929. The research undertaken during this period led to the publication of several books: *The Girdle of Chastity* [Dingwall 1923], a study of chastity belts and similar devices throughout the ages, *Male Infibulation* [Dingwall 1925, revised edition 1931], and *Artificial Cranial Deformation*. [Dingwall 1931b] His fascination with these most recondite of subjects is what one would expect of a man whose entry in *Who’s Who* referred to his interests as “studying rare and queer customs.” [Who was who 1991, p.204]

He also had a reputation as a meticulous archivist and cataloguer. His practical guide *How to use a large library* [Dingwall 1933] testified to his expertise in this area. He was also an avid collector. Alan Gauld of the SPR recollects that Dingwall's Cambridge flat was "so crowded with books, automata, unusual clocks, and other curiosities, that moving about in it required some care." [Gauld 1987, p.230] There was certainly an eccentric aspect to Dingwall's personality; witness his collection of screws and scraps of metal, which he had first salvaged from rubbish bins near his flat in Cambridge, and then classified. Gauld recollects "being taken round the workshop wherein reposed a fine collection of tools, and enormous quantities of nails, screws, nuts, bolts and oddments all stored by size or gauge in nests of labelled drawers" [Gauld 1987, p.232]. He was a frequent of sales and auctions, once purchasing - at a sale of garden items - a large number of green seed envelopes which he used for several years for his own correspondence.

Life During Wartime

Dingwall had married his first wife, Doris Dunn, in 1918; they had met as fellow members of the SPR and lived in suburban respectability at Golders Green. But theirs was a troubled relationship, and by 1933 she had taken up with the psychologist and anthropologist John Willoughby Layard – Dingwall refusing to grant her a divorce until some ten years later. Concealing his emotional anguish underneath jocularity, Dingwall told friends that he "had lost her in the London Underground about 1930 and had not seen her since." [Gauld 1987, p.236]

He then spent two years travelling widely. Between 1935 and 1937, he visited Europe, North and South America, and the Caribbean, in further pursuit of those "rare and queer customs." Thus, in September 1936, he was visiting Haiti, apparently to investigate Voodoo, with a special interest in establishing the veracity, or otherwise, of zombies. Around this time he also visited Barbados, where he visited the Chase family vault, with its alleged moving coffins.

There is a certain amount of mystery regarding Dingwall's activities during WW2. He was, from 1941 to 1945, attached to the wartime Ministry of Information, and to a department of the Foreign Office, but always remained tight-lipped with regard to his activities at both. It has been suggested that he had been involved in propaganda and disinformation. [West 1987] His friend Guy Lyon Playfair has stated that Dingwall had been associated in some unspecified way with Bletchley Park, but whether he worked in decryption, radio interception or another area remains unclear. [Playfair 2012]

In his post-war correspondence, Dingwall occasionally referred to 'black ops,' without elaboration. In September 1945, he told Price that his "...overtime work with the Govt from 1941 [...] is now over and I am on the point of demobilisation," [Letter, EJD to HP, 15 September 1945. SHL, MS912, Box 6, A-I, 217] but without explanation as to the nature of that work.

Remarks Dingwall to his friend Alan Gauld would suggest that he had indeed been (or perhaps still was) involved in intelligence work; during the Cold War, he suggested that the Soviets were experimenting with "telepathic hypnosis for military purposes" and that they had infiltrated the world of American parapsychology by inserting their own agents. [Gauld 1987, p.232]

In later life, he took a great interest in the UFO phenomenon, hinting that world powers knew more about the subject than they had hitherto revealed. Apparently unsuccessfully, he had urged his contacts in the Ministry of Defence to establish a department dedicated to the investigation of the paranormal. [Playfair 2012]

'Dirty Ding' and the 'Private Case'

After the War, Dingwall worked at the Library of the British Museum; joining their ranks as a Voluntary Assistant in April 1946 (his considerable wealth meant that he did not have to seek paid employment). Soon, owing to his considerable expertise in library cataloguing, as well as his willingness to purchase rare items - using his own funds – which he then donated to the Museum, he was promoted to the position of Honorary Assistant Keeper in the Department of Printed Books. His particular area of specialization at the Museum was erotica, and, as such, had responsibility for the Museum's 'Private Case' of obscene literature. It is this aspect of his life which gave rise to the unfortunate and unwarranted nickname 'Dirty Ding.'

The origins of the 'Private Case' are a mystery, but it appears to have been created some time in the mid-19th century, when it began life as a cupboard kept in the office of the Keeper of Printed Books. Comprising 27 books in 1850, the collection expanded over the years so that by 1900 it numbered many hundreds. It consisted mostly of erotic material, and did not appear on the general catalogue. Readers wishing to consult the material therein were – until the 1960s – subjected to "a cross-examination calculated to deter all but really honest and legitimate research." [British Library 1890] It was considerably enlarged in 1900 due to the acquisition of the Ashbee collection; Henry Spencer Ashbee – thought by many (although not Dingwall to have been the author of the multi-volume Victorian pornographic *tour de force*, *My Secret Life* – was a great collector of erotica, which was

willed to the Museum upon his death in 1900, with over 1,500 books being added to the 'Private Case'. Nevertheless, it is said of Dingwall, in a history of the Library, that he "was more important than anyone else in building up the Private Case." [Cross 1991, p.214] Thus, in 1947, Dingwall donated 44 books, mostly in German, including *Meine grausame süsse Reitpeitsche* ("My sweet cruel whip") [Rombach, c.1904], and *Das Flagellanten Schloss* ("The Castle of the Flagellants") [Carlo Antonio, no date]. He also donated some rare and valuable typewritten and carbon-copied notes produced by various German flagellation clubs, as well as some rare French works such as Apollinaire's *Le Verger des Amours* [1924], and *Nini à Lesbos* by Jacques de Linettes [1950]. He also donated *Men and Boys*, a history of pederasty in the Classical world, which he had acquired from the collection of the Reverend Alfred Reginald Thorold Winckley. Perhaps the most significant work obtained by Dingwall for the 'Private Case' was a first edition (1749) of John Cleland's *Memoirs of a Woman of Pleasure* (otherwise known as *Fanny Hill*).

Another set of British Library holdings, the Wildman Collection, comprises the publications – periodicals and leaflets – of the *National Society for the Retention of Corporal Punishment in Schools*, and the related *Corpun Educational Association*. These were both essentially front organizations for one Eric Arthur Wildman, of Walthamstow. Wildman - who described himself as a supplier of canes to schools - also produced pamphlets such as *Modern Miss Delinquent*, *Punishment Posture for Girls*, *The German Girl: Corporal Punishment in Germany and Austria* and *The Cleansing Cane*.

Long recognized as an expert in matters of abnormal sexuality, Dingwall would sometimes be called upon by Scotland Yard to advise, in cases having a bizarre or unusual sex angle. It is understood that the police consulted Dingwall during their investigations into the Profumo scandal. He certainly knew of aspects of the case that had been omitted from Lord Denning's official report. As research for their book *Honeytrap*, investigative journalists Anthony Summers and Stephen Dorril interviewed Dingwall just prior to his death. He told them of a woman named 'Carmen' who provided all manner of sexual services, "covering every conceivable anomaly and perversion" and with "elaborate charades" being provided. In the late 1950s and early 1960s, Dingwall explained, "she owned a large country house in Berkshire, catering to people with the money to participate...the front for their activities was that they posed as antique dealers." [Summers and Dorril 1988, p.279-280] Summers and Dorril discovered that one of Carmen's customers had been a Conservative Secretary of State. Dingwall confirmed this, saying that the Minister "used to go down there quite a lot, but I wouldn't imagine he would wish to talk about it. I heard that he favoured a 'babies and nursemaids' scene in which he played the nursemaid." [Summers and Dorril 1988, p.280]

As a result of the police investigation into Stephen Ward, several influential and wealthy people - had had their private peccadilloes exposed. David Mountbatten, the third Marquess of Milford Haven, and Beecher Moore, a wealthy expatriate American living in London - both decided that it would be unwise to retain possession of their extensive pornography collections. Accordingly, and presumably in an arrangement brokered by Dingwall, the material was offered to the British Museum's Library. Naturally, much of it ended up in the 'Private Case.' Items rejected by the Principal Keeper of the Library ("we are the Department of Printed Books [...] not an institute of sexual research." [Cross 1991, p.219] were accepted by the Kinsey Institute for Sex Research. Dingwall and Kinsey had been friends since June 1954, when Dingwall had visited Kinsey's Institute, at Bloomington, Indiana, bringing with him an 18th century sheep's-gut condom, complete with original wrappers, for the Institute's collection. When Kinsey announced that he was planning a visit to Europe in 1955, Dingwall offered him the use of his house as a base for his work in England, gave him a tour around the British Museum and Library's erotica collections, and took him on a walking tour around London's red-light areas. The two men evidently had a good deal of respect for each other's scientific approach to the subject. Indeed, Dingwall was later to describe Kinsey, after the latter's death in 1957, as "one of the greatest men I have ever met." [Gathorne-Hardy 2004, p.411]

Final Years

In December 1954 Dingwall married a psychologist, Dr Norah Margaret Davis. They both took time off work to attend the registry office, and afterwards, celebrated with a lunch of kippers. Margaret was, by all accounts, his intellectual equal: "an intelligent and charming woman whose mind was clearly as shrewd as Ding's although she would speak it less stridently." [Playfair 1987, p.164]. Within a couple of years they moved from Cambridge to East Sussex, at Margaret's suggestion. Their new home, near Crowhurst, had a large garden, and was set in 60 acres of pine forest. Together, they entertained many visitors, and Dingwall, now in his late sixties, was experiencing something of a new lease of life. His devotion to Margaret was obvious, and when, on Christmas Eve 1976, she suddenly and unexpectedly died, Dingwall's desolation was clear to see.

It is notable that after Margaret's death, Dingwall, the arch-rationalist and sceptic, experienced several apparently paranormal incidents which he found difficult to account for. Distraught, and hoping to find evidence of post-death survival, he attempted to establish contact with Margaret via mediums. At one sitting, several pieces of personal information were provided by the medium, which Dingwall confirmed to be correct. And at the seaside apartment at St Leonard's-on-Sea to

which they had moved just prior to Margaret's death, and where the octogenarian Dingwall now resided, odd things took place. An 'apport' in the form of an old Bakelite plug appeared, a household object unfathomably fell off a shelf in the kitchen whilst Dingwall was washing up – "he did not think it should have fallen naturally" - and a clock "behaved very curiously soon after Margaret's death." [Playfair 1987, p.165]

Despite his worsening health, Dingwall lived on, alone, for another ten years. It is a tribute to his scientific detachment and lack of self-pity that, during the final year of his life, he remarked to a friend that he found his own physical deterioration "absolutely fascinating." [Playfair 1987, p.166]

END

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