

COMMENTARY

On the Essay Review “William Jackson Crawford on the Goligher Circle” by Michael Tymn

MICHAEL NAHM

Freiburg, Germany

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Abstract—A circle for physical mediumship, the Goligher circle, was recently described in an Essay Review by Michael Tymn in this Journal. This Commentary rectifies several errors contained in that Essay Review, and presents supplementary information about selected aspects of the circle as discussed by Tymn.

In a recent issue of this Journal, Michael Tymn (2013) presented an overview on the work of William Jackson Crawford with the Goligher Circle, drawing on four books Crawford wrote. It is commendable that Tymn drew the attention of readers to these studies, famous in days of yore, which stirred fierce and hostile debates within the community of psychical researchers, especially in Germany (e.g., Oesterreich 1926, Rosenbusch 1927). The case of the Goligher Circle is a good example illustrating the difficulties in judging reported phenomena of physical mediumship. Even when visual documentation devices such as cameras are used, sitters observing the same phenomena can be led to contrasting opinions in their interpretation. While it remains difficult to come to a firm conclusion about Crawford’s investigations, it seems appropriate to add a few comments about Tymn’s Essay Review and the Goligher Circle.

Basics about the Goligher Circle

First, Crawford experimented with the Circle for six years, from 1914 to 1920, not only for two-and-a-half years as Tymn alleges (p. 529). Moreover, Crawford has not explained how many sittings he held with the circle in his books. Hence, it remains unclear why Tymn stated that Crawford held 87 sittings in all (p. 529). Perhaps Tymn has misinterpreted this number, which represents the number of *experiments* that Crawford described in his first book (Crawford 1919a). However, the number of experiments does not

equal the number of sittings needed to perform them, because some were performed within a single sitting, and it took several sittings to accomplish others. In addition, there are many other experiments described in two later books (Crawford 1919b, 1921) and in Fournier d'Albe (1922). During the time Crawford worked with the Goligher Circle, it consisted of seven persons including Kathleen Goligher as the main medium and her three sisters and one brother (not "four sisters;" Tymn 2013:530). Tymn maintains that the three books by Crawford cited above "deal solely with the Goligher phenomena" (p. 529). Yet, Crawford (1919b:160–201) wrote two chapters that explicitly and exclusively deal with experiments performed with two other mediums. One chapter is concerned with the table phenomena of another medium, the other chapter chiefly concerns direct voice phenomena.

During the experiments conducted in the Goligher Circle, all activity was usually coordinated with the unseen operators behind the scenes. Tymn rightly complains that Crawford often didn't specify by which means the communication with them was accomplished, and Tymn lists raps, table tilting, automatic writing, trance voice, and direct voice as possibilities. He suggests that the latter might play a role in this communication (p. 535). However, Crawford stated that direct voice didn't work with Kathleen Goligher (Crawford 1919b:159). Rather, the communications at the sittings for physical phenomena were mediated by a code consisting of raps on the floor that were given in reply to spoken questions, or that indicated the correct letter when a Circle member spelled out the alphabet to form words or sentences (Crawford 1919b:12f, Fournier d'Albe 1922).

Tymn also wonders why "trance voice" would be listed among Kathleen Goligher's phenomena by Crawford when she was not in trance during sittings (p. 535). Crawford mentioned "trance speaking" in general as one phenomenon occurring in the Circle, whose other members were also said to possess limited mediumistic abilities (Crawford 1919a:1). Indeed, some of them would occasionally fall into trance (Crawford 1919a:217, 1921:13). Still, Kathleen also entered apparent trance states in sittings *not* concerned with physical phenomena, namely, when Crawford questioned her (or rather, the supposed "operators") about the whereabouts of the ostensible beyond (Crawford 1919a:238). On such occasions, she would speak with her (trance) voice.

Comments about Guest Sitters and the Question of Fraud

Tymn mentions that Crawford resisted efforts by other members of the Society for Psychical Research (SPR) in addition to William Barrett to sit with the group (p. 538). Barrett's account was not only published in the book mentioned by Tymn, but also in the *Proceedings of the SPR* (Barrett

1919). Charles Drayton Thomas relates that Lady Barrett had likewise been present at the sitting, and she told him “that while Sir William was levitated with the table she was feeling with her umbrella underneath the table legs and satisfied herself that no cords or implements of any kind were being used. All was clear; the umbrella met with no obstructions” (Thomas 1946–1949:126). Nevertheless, one other respected member of the SPR sat with the Circle in 1916: Whately Smith (Carington). He wrote a favorable account of his experiences (Smith 1919). However, when he visited the Circle a second time in 1920, he found a “conspicuous and startling deterioration” of the phenomena and he concluded that the mediumship had become fraudulent (Salter 1946–1949:202). Still, he remained convinced that the phenomena at the first sitting had been genuine. It seems that no details are known about Smith’s second visit—not even if Crawford was still alive then. That the Circle sat with guests shortly after Crawford’s death is confirmed by a positive report by psychical researcher F. McCarthy Stephenson (1920) about a sitting held in September 1920.

Toward the end of his *Essay Review*, Tymn maintains that Crawford’s photographs “speak for themselves, unless, as a last resort, one is to assume that he faked them” (p. 538). However, not even the harshest of Crawford’s critics have accused him of fraud. Usually, they followed Fournier d’Albe (1922) and depicted Crawford as an ingenuous and credulous enthusiast who was deceived by the Goligher family. Fournier d’Albe held 20 sittings with the Goligher Circle in 1921 (not in 1922, as related by Tymn, p. 537), and concluded that they moved the tables with their feet and introduced chiffon to simulate emanations of ectoplasm. Yet, like Crawford, Fournier d’Albe was disappointingly closefisted with regard to describing crucial details of the sittings. In fact, he experienced several phenomena that might well have been genuine. For example, he experienced the often-reported Goligher phenomenon of the table being “glued” to the floor in the center of the Circle: He tried to push and to pull it, but it resisted “as if held by a couple of strong men” (Fournier d’Albe 1922:9). This happened under conditions of red light that permitted seeing “most of the hands of the sitters but none of their legs” (p. 10). Yet, the author doesn’t provide more information about this incident, nor on several other interesting occurrences. Much remains unclear. Fournier d’Albe didn’t even try to trace the origins of the frequent raps, which might have constituted an appropriate start for his investigations. The book contains so many omissions that Dingwall (1923–1924) considered a critical and detailed examination of Fournier d’Albe’s book valueless. Indeed, the eyewitness accounts of several guest visitors of the Circle presented in the Appendix, among them the then-president of the Glasgow Society for Conjurers, rank among the more intriguing contents

of the book. Similarly, Stephenson, who had visited the Circle a few times before Crawford's death and one time shortly thereafter, and who was again present at seven sittings held with Fournier d'Albe, opposed the latter's conclusions (Anonymous 1936). Fournier d'Albe remained convinced of fraud, and reaffirmed his accusation in 1927. He stated that the Circle had broken up since his exposure, that Kathleen Goligher was happily married, and that she didn't seem to like being reminded of her former girlish pranks (Fournier d'Albe 1927). Indeed, she wasn't keen on continuing experimental sittings after the disaster with Fournier d'Albe. She became Mrs. Donaldson, and a mother of two girls. Still, her husband persuaded her to sit again for photographic documentation of the phenomena with Stephenson (Donaldson 1933). She continued to meet for private sittings that included her husband until at least October 1936, and allowed Stephenson to perform further controlled experiments (Anonymous 1936, Stephenson 1936a, 1936b, 1937; see also Barham 1988).

Finally, it might be noted that weighing experiments almost identical to Crawford's approach had been performed earlier with Eusapia Palladino by a French committee of researchers. They provided the same result: The medium's body weight increased by approximately the weight of the table when it levitated (Courtier 1908).

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