

HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

Revealing the Real Madame d’Esperance: An Historical and Psychological Investigation

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Abstract—Madame d’Esperance was a physical medium, well-known for her materialized forms, which bereaved sitters often recognized as their dead relatives. A critical evaluation is made of her acclaimed autobiographical account, *Shadow Land*, with a particular focus on her activities, first in Newcastle, England, and then in Gothenburg, Sweden. In this process, we had access to recently discovered archives and rare publications. A presentation is made of some of the fraudulent methods used by physical mediums and the possible psychological processes behind the remarkable experiences of the sitters attending séances.

Keywords: mediumship—dissociation—perception—history of psychical research—altered states

Arguably, the most bizarre and psychologically challenging cases in the history of psychical research concern the claims by physical mediums to produce materializations of human forms. The case presented here, that of Madame d’Esperance, is particularly challenging because bereaved sitters claimed to recognize and greet the materialized forms as their dead loved ones (Armstrong 1880, Aksakov 1897a, Barkas 1876, Bates 1880, Orthwaite 1879c, Oxley 1880, Resurgam 1880). The historical and psychological study of this case aims to provide some clarity concerning what took place and the psychological mechanisms behind such extraordinary experiences. This perspective may be considered as having current relevance for explaining the claims of some contemporary mediums

such as the controversial Kai Mügge (Braude 2014, 2016, Nahm 2014, 2016). Furthermore, the d'Esperance case has some notoriety because with one exception (Haraldsson & Gissurason 2015) it appears to be unique in claiming evidence for a partial dematerialization of the medium's body to have occurred.

In seeking an explanation for the various facets of this case, we have had access to the autobiography of the medium, written accounts from the period, some recently discovered archival records at the College of Psychic Studies in London, and finally a series of virtually unknown archived photographic and other documentation at the University of Gothenburg. It has been argued that the availability of photographic records is a prerequisite for determining the precise nature of the phenomena under scrutiny (Parker 2016).

This case is known in the literature as “Madame d'Esperance” or “Elizabeth Hope Reed,” with various permutations occurring in the spelling of d'Esperance (and Reed is sometimes given as Reid). Madame d'Esperance became something of a “nom de célébrité in spiritualistic circles in the early 1900s”: She is included as one of the “great mediums” in Doyle's historical review (1927/2011), and Inglis (1979:448) calls her “the most respected medium in Europe.” The claims surrounding her case are still regarded by some writers as enigmatic. For instance, Melton (1996) writes about the fraud issue: “that her case must remain open, though there is every reason to believe that she simply was never caught.” That she was *not* caught is, as we shall document, not actually true, but such statements illustrate some of the fundamental disinformation that characterizes the case.

Major difficulties arose in investigating this case, not least the disinformation that pervades much of the autobiography *Shadow Land or Light From the Other Side* (d'Esperance 1897) but also that most independent accounts of the events and séances are to be found only in rare spiritualistic publications. Many of these rare accounts exist only in Swedish, Norwegian, Danish, or German. When these difficulties are surmounted and accounts are collated, some claims can be shown to be fiction.

The Correction of Disinformation about This Case

There is no definitive or reliable biography of Madame d'Esperance, and the present account is not intended to be a complete or detailed biography but aims primarily to provide a corrective overview with a focus on the 20 years the medium was resident in Sweden, mainly in Gothenburg.

Many biographical accounts suggest that the real name of the medium known as Madame d'Esperance is Elizabeth Hope, and some record it as

Elizabeth Hope Reed, Reed being given as her married name (e.g., https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mme._d%27Esperance). The surname of Hope may have been attributed to her because the French word *esperance* translates into the English *hope*, or because in her own biographical account she describes her mission in life as giving hope, hence the use of the nom de plume 'Esperance' to convey her purpose as a Spiritualist medium. The spelling of *Esperance* is usually given without the French accent aigu. Her birth date is usually given as 1855, and her death as occurring in 1919, but as we will reveal all of this (with the exception of the death date) can be shown to be incorrect.

In July 2013, a small collection of her personal papers was discovered in the archives of the College of Psychic Studies in London (formerly the London Spiritualist Alliance) where the medium had been held in high regard and where a painting of her is still prominently displayed. The papers had been deposited there in 1920, after the medium's death, by a Copenhagen Spiritualist friend, Mr. Jensen. Along with the papers was a covering letter, from Mr. Jensen to a Danish consulate with the following information: "Maiden name—Puttock d'Esperance, born 20/11/1855 (this date was given to me by herself). She had been married to Thomas J. Reed d'Esperance born at Durham City" (Price 2014).

Despite this information having been provided by the medium herself, it is flawed. It did, however, provide a starting point for an investigation by Warwood (2014) into her family history.

So, who was Madame d'Esperance? Using English public birth and death records, the only individual who could be identified with this background was Elizabeth Jane Puttock born in 1848, and baptized on December 10th of that year at St. James Church, Shoreditch, the daughter of George Puttock and his wife Elizabeth Jane Tovey. The birth certificate for Elizabeth Jane Puttock confirmed that she was born November 20, 1848, at 2 Browns Buildings, Clifton Street, Shoreditch. The employment of her father was given as mariner, which fitted somewhat with claims that the father was a sea captain. Also congruent with the d'Esperance account was that Elizabeth Jane Puttock had married Thomas Jackson Reed, on August 13, 1870, in Newcastle-on-Tyne.

The above data establish that 1855 as the year of birth is wrong, while confirming her marriage and the surname of her husband. The names "Hope" and "d'Esperance" are thus clearly inventions. The identification of d'Esperance as Elizabeth Jane Puttock has been independently confirmed through contact with present-day descendants of the Puttock family. In 2001, film producer Zoe Beloff gave a lecture, based on her dramatization

of d'Esperance's *Shadow Land or Light from the Other Side*, that attracted the attention of the Puttock family who made contact with Beloff, advising her that Madame d'Esperance was Elizabeth Puttock (Beloff 2001). More recently, the confirmation of her identity as Elizabeth Puttock has been provided by a descendant who inherited correspondence from d'Esperance to her sister Amy Puttock along with various handwritten and dated records of the medium's life in Sweden and Germany (Warwood 2015).

Hereafter, we think it is most appropriate to refer to the medium as Puttock–d'Esperance rather than any other variation of Puttock, Reed, Hope, or d'Esperance.

With this knowledge of true identity in mind, the claims made by Elizabeth Puttock–d'Esperance can be evaluated using census records and other historical records. There appear to be significant discrepancies between her version of her life and that shown in these records. The *Shadow Land* autobiography gives a vivid account of a lonely child living in a large house in Victorian London with access to a servant and nurse. She sees herself as a child gifted with the ability to see and contact ghosts in that house. Her preoccupation with these "shadow people" and the "shadow land" was considered unhealthy and led to contact with a physician who warned her of giving attention to these for fear she would be diagnosed "mad." The outcome was a convalescent voyage with her sea captain father.

How much truth is there in this autobiography? Table 1 shows the discrepancies.

According to the 1871 census, Thomas J. Reed, age 27, and Elizabeth J. Reed, age 22, were residing at 25 Sarah Street in Newcastle-on-Tyne. They appear to have separated by 1879, since her husband was then living with another woman to whom he was later recorded as being married, with children. In spite of this, no record of a divorce from Elizabeth has been found (Warwood 2014). Some secondary accounts (McCabe 1920) report incorrectly that she was a widow. The book *Shadow Land* makes no mention of the separation or widowhood but continues with a detailed account of her later life as a medium beginning with the 10-year period in Newcastle and then a long period of nearly 20 years in Gothenburg, which she used as a base to visit other parts of Scandinavia, Germany, and France.

Many of Puttock–d'Esperance's contemporaries appear to have been charmed by the apparent authentic ring to her story in the book *Shadow Land*. The book receives even today some acclaim for its experiential description of what it means to be a medium (Tromp 2006). Moreover, those who came in direct contact with her commented on her personal charisma (e.g., Aksakov 1897a, 1897b, Bjerre 1958, Seiling 1907). Poul Bjerre, one of the foremost Scandinavian physician–psychoanalysts of the period, published

TABLE 1
Discrepancies between the Autobiographical Account and Historical Records

Claims	Discrepancies from Historical Records
<p>Servant and Nurse: There was a "servant, who considered my liking for the haunted rooms as "uncanny" and unnatural" "I could never quite understand nurse's remarks about the loneliness of the rooms, though her threats about the ghosts frightened me." (p. 7)</p>	<p>The Puttock family had no servants and there is no evidence of a nurse being present.</p>
<p>Lonely childhood: ". . . my mother was an invalid and for a long time confined to her bed, I suppose there was sufficient occupation for our servant. There were no other children to keep me company; the little brother and sister who had been born only lived a few weeks, so that my earliest years were lonely ones, . . ." (p. 12) "Sometimes in my pleasure and wonderment I felt that I must talk with someone about these strange people whom no one but myself seemed to see. My confidants were usually an old servant and my grandmother who came sometimes for a few weeks to stay with us (p. 18). [At this point she is talking about being 14 years old.]</p>	<p>Her youngest brother George was born in 1850 and died in 1852, not "after having lived only a few weeks." By age 4, she had a younger brother and by 9, a sister. In 1861 the family resided at 2 Johnston Street, St. George in the East, a multiple occupation property in a then relatively poor area of London. There were no servants listed in the Puttock household. By then 12 years old, she was living with her mother and siblings Arthur, 8, Amy, 3, and George William 1. Another family also occupied rooms in the building.</p>
<p>Her age at Marriage: She relates meeting with the fortune teller who told her she would "be married in 2 years or less" and that this prediction came true (pp. 45–48).</p>	<p>At the time in 1868 she would be 18 or 19 which means she was 21, and almost 22, when she married Thomas Jackson Reed two years later in 1870, and not 19 as so many articles claim.</p>
<p>The return of the Shadow People: "It was during the first days of my married life that my dream people began again to haunt me. Transplanted from the midst of my small, noisy brothers and sister, from the busy life of elder sister, nurse, and governess to four obstreperous, mischievous young ones, to the solitude of my new home, alone for the greater part of the day with very little to occupy my time, I was horrified to find that the old fancies of seeing people about me returned in full force."</p>	<p>At this time, that is August 1870, her eldest brother was 17 and an apprentice engineer. Her sister Amy was 12, brother George 10 and Percy 6 which seems inconsistent with "small noisy brothers and sister."</p>
<p>Her father was a sea captain: In <i>Shadow Land</i> between p. 48 and p. 49 is a drawing by her of a ghost ship: She writes "The 'shadow ship' as I saw it in the Mediterranean in 1867 from the <i>SS Sardinian</i>."</p>	<p>George Puttock was a mariner who received his Masters Certificate in June 1863 after serving as Mate and then Master of the <i>Sardinian</i> between October 1859 and 1864. In 1867 when she claimed she was on the ship, he wasn't Master of the <i>Sardinian</i>, and in 1867 Puttock-d'Esperance, if she went on this voyage, would have been 19 years old and not 13 or 14 as she claimed.</p>

a detailed record that he had made of the 9 séances during 1894, which he in his student days attended in Gothenburg. Even writing 60 years later, his conclusions are still colored by the indelible impression of innocence and integrity that Puttock–d’Esperance had made upon him. Bjerre was well aware that there was evidence that she enacted the role of spirit forms. Perhaps in order to reconcile the apparent duplicity of the medium with her air of innocence together with his own positive experiences of her séances, he proposed a rather contrived theory of emanations being emitted from the medium’s body that temporarily transformed her face and body into the spirit form and vice versa (Bjerre 1958).

One of Puttock–d’Esperance’s most enthusiastic supporters was Alexandr Aksakov (occasionally written as Aksakof), a state councilor to the Russian Czar, with an active interest in psychical research. Akaskov took part in several of the Puttock–d’Esperance séances in Sweden and wrote an introduction to her book in which he praised her honesty and her psychic gifts yet vaguely hinted that the materializations in her séances were an enigma. He speculated that there was a dematerialization of the medium’s body and a re-materialization of it into the form of a dead person.

Some of these Scandinavian séances are described in detail in the autobiography and in other publications: Typically, those present sat for several hours in near darkness with the medium sitting in a cabinet while the sitters sang in chorus until eventually a wide range of spiritualistic phenomena would occur: Puttock–d’Esperance’s repertoire was more versatile than those of many physical mediums, ranging from table tilting, coded table raps, automatic writing, the drawing of spirit faces, the appearance of tall exotic flowers as apports, and most dramatic of all, the materializations of full-formed human figures that were recognized and sometimes embraced by sitters. Commenting on his written records and her autobiography some 60 years later, Bjerre held to his previous conviction that while fraud might have occurred, some phenomena were genuinely paranormal.

The autobiography in the light of the above discrepancies can indeed be considered as revealing at least some of the gifts the medium possessed, although perhaps not those she wished to be credited for. Undoubtedly, part of her success as a medium was due to her ability as a writer to describe events in a manner that gave a vivid impression of sincerity and a richness of inner life, especially in describing her apparent dissociated states. In addition to *Shadow Land*, she authored a second, although much lesser-known, book, *Northern Lights*, which concerns occult practices such as blood-stopping, healing, and psychic phenomena that she encountered on her travels.

Although any psychological profile carried out at distance, especially

120 years later, is a risky venture, the autobiography and life story is consistent with that of a “fantasy-prone personality” (Wilson & Barber 1983). However, just how fantasy proneness, as a psychological test measure, relates to mediumistic-type experiences, is largely unexplored. It is known that fantasy proneness has a series of rich and complex networks of relationships with paranormal experiences, suggestibility, a form of “normal dissociation” (such as absorption in inner experiences), creativity, and weak psychological boundaries with the world. A small percentage of such fantasy-prone individuals lack the ability to distinguish their fantasy from real events (see Parker [2015a, 2015b] for a review of current research on this topic).

Descriptions of the medium’s background from her time in Newcastle emphasize her unexpected intellectual gifts with respect to her limited educational background. For instance, Robertson writes that

she had, like so many spiritual exponents, no educational advantages. Ill health kept her from scholastic duties . . . When Mr. Barkas met her she was a young woman of twenty-six, the wife of an outdoor foreman. She was but a workingwoman, who, in her small house, did all the work thereof. (Robertson 1908:127)

Another historian of spiritualism describes her in a similar manner: “She seemed refined, though poorly educated” (McCabe 1920:167).

At that time, a common employment for women belonging to a working class background was to “go into service,” which meant working as a maid for the wealthy. Several writers have commented on how mediumship from the 1870s until 1930s fulfilled an important alternative role for gifted women from a working class background to assert themselves in a male-dominated society (Oppenheim 1985, Tromp 2006, Owen 1989, Herr & Wolfram 2009). The outlets for women who had creativity and strong emotional needs were extremely limited, and the emotional suppression of women may well be the explanation for the prevalence of the disturbance then labeled as hysteria. Two possible career choices that allowed for emotional expression were acting and mediumship. Choosing acting might provide a form of emotional fulfillment, but at that time the profession had a low status. Choosing to become a professional, fee-charging medium, especially for those with spiritual experiences, might be an alternative, but even that profession carried a somewhat dubious social status. A few mediums could attain the high status of a “society medium,” who officially did not charge fees but for whom donations from wealthy sponsors provided a comfortable means of support, which might have provided expression for their psychological and in some cases spiritual needs (Owen 1989).

The Newcastle Séances

Despite her working class background and her lack of formal education, the medium Puttock–d’Esperance seems to have rapidly risen in status in Newcastle and came to be regarded among spiritualists as “a pretty and refined young widow” (McCabe 1920:167). Yet the widow status does not tally with the records of her husband’s life. Thomas Jackson Reed and Emily Louise King had 8 children between 1880 and 1891, and he died at age 84 in 1927 (Price 2013:234 footnotes).

Newcastle seems to have been during the 1870s a thriving hotspot for Spiritualism and its mediums. The Spiritualist community in Newcastle was a relatively small and close-knit one, especially in the early to middle 1870s. People who considered themselves Spiritualists, and those who were the mediums of the movement, not only attended the lectures and séances but all the social activities as well—the social and musical evenings, annual picnics, bazaars, etc. What was initially called the ‘Newcastle Psychological Society,’ was formed in 1872 and became 7 years later The Newcastle Spiritual Evidence Society, which still exists to the present day. One of the driving forces in investigating physical mediumship during this early period was the bookseller and amateur naturalist (and later in life alderman) Thomas Pallister Barkas (Warwood 2014).

Two of Puttock–d’Esperance’s contemporaries rapidly became the main focus of attention by this Society and later by Fredrick Myers, Edmund Gurney, and Henry and Eleanor Sidgwick. These were the physical mediums Catharine Elizabeth Wood (1852–1884) and Annie Fairlamb (1856–1939). Catharine Wood went into service at the age of 14, but Fairlamb’s family situation was different. While her father died in 1871, when Fairlamb was 14, she had three older brothers who were fully employed in skilled work and still living at home, and this presumably helped her avoid the necessity of domestic service (Warwood 2014). The popularity of both these mediums led them by the mid-1870s to receive some moderate remuneration for their services by the above-mentioned Newcastle Psychological Society.

Some personal records of Puttock–d’Esperance were very recently (2015) found in the archives of the College of Psychic Studies, London. Concerning Wood’s and Fairlamb’s séances, she wrote that “according to report the manifestations produced through their mediumship were of a most extraordinary and convincing character.” It also appears clear from other records that she was willing herself to endorse Wood’s mediumship. Orthwaite (1879d:746) writes:

Mrs. Esperance wishes me to report that she and a friend attended Miss Wood's séance on the 20th inst., when the same forms as described above appeared under similar stringent conditions as those which I have related—in fact under such conditions, she says, as could not leave a shadow of a doubt in the minds of the sitters as to the genuineness of the phenomena.

If it is accepted that Wood and Fairlamb were fraudulently producing their phenomena, and there is considerable evidence for this, then Puttock–d'Esperance's involvement with them could have given her intimate knowledge of the methods used by both mediums to produce their materializations.

The Investigations of the Newcastle Mediums by the Cambridge Trinity College Group

A series of investigations over a 2-year period (1875 to 1877) of the mediums Catherine Wood and Annie Fairlamb has some historical significance. This is because the principal investigators were the Trinity College academics Frederic Myers, Henry Sidgwick, and Edmund Gurney, joined later by Walter Leaf and Eleanor Sidgwick. It was the first major investigation of physical mediumship by this group, and all of these investigators would go on to become founding or active members of the Society for Psychical Research. Trevor Hamilton in writing of Myers, notes that in this investigation that “he [Myers] and his colleagues began to hone the skills that would serve them well during the 1880s. The investigation of Wood and Fairlamb was extensive and thorough” (Hamilton 2009:95). Undoubtedly, it was these skills that enabled them to take the step from sheltered academia to the real world of mediums such as Eusapia Palladino.

News of the Newcastle mediums had reached the Trinity group by another of the future SPR's founding members, Hensleigh Wedgewood, who knew Barkas. The group, Myers, Sidgwick, and Gurney, took part, in various combinations, in sittings with the two mediums at the Newcastle home of Barkas between January and March 1875 (Gauld 1968). The séances took place in low light with the mediums sitting in a wooden-framed cabinet with the sitters singing hymns for some hours while they awaited the appearance of the materialized forms. Various human forms who were known from previous séances would then appear and interact with the sitters before finally returning to the cabinet. Subsequently, both Wood and Fairlamb were invited to London and paid to carry out a series of séances held at Myer's lodgings in

Mayfair commencing in April 1875, and a further series of sittings was carried out at Arthur Balfour's house.

To the credit of these investigators, a better method was then used to secure with padlocked belts the mediums, rather than the mere cords and seals in Newcastle. When the belts were considered securely tight, then no materializations occurred (Gauld 1968, Sidgwick 1886). Further tests with Eleanor Sidgwick present were carried out in Cambridge that summer. She wrote:

the form came out of the cabinet three times, and it was found by trial afterwards that the medium could each time have come just so far without breaking loose from the fastenings. This coincidence was suggestive. (Sidgwick 1886:52)

The investigators persevered during January 1877 with yet further tests, this time in Newcastle. Some years later, Eleanor Sidgwick revealed:

At any rate the indications of deception were palpable and sufficient, and we were not surprised to hear a few months later that a more aggressive investigator had violated the rules of the séance, and captured Miss Wood personating the 'spirit'. (Sidgwick 1886:53)

Details of the Catherine Wood exposure are given in the journal *The Medium and Daybreak* (Editorial 1877/2011). Annie Fairlamb, after marrying and giving birth to 3 children, moved with the family in 1891 to Australia where an intensive debate took place concerning her alleged exposure during a séance there (Psyche 1895).

At the stage when the Trinity College group carried out their investigations of the Newcastle mediums, Puttock-d'Esperance had not begun performing as a materialization medium but was claiming to have an extraordinary ability to receive "spirit guidance." Barkas (1876) gave a lecture concerning Puttock-d'Esperance's abilities entitled: "Recent Experiments in Psychology. Extraordinary replies to questions on scientific subjects by a young lady of very limited education." With the encouragement of Barkas, on a return visit to Newcastle in October 1875 Myers had sittings during three days with Puttock-d'Esperance but concluded that, although it was indeed a curious case, the knowledge she demonstrated failed to show any real understanding of the subjects she talked about (Myers 1885). This conclusion was elaborated on years later by Myer's colleague, Frank Podmore, who wrote:

I imagine a fairly intelligent schoolboy, if he had known beforehand the subject of his *viva voce* examination, and had been able, as Madame Esperance apparently was, to suggest or modify the questions, or when hard pressed to refuse an answer, above all, if his answers had been selected and touched up by a sympathetic examiner—such a schoolboy, I imagine, if he could have been induced to cram at all, would have had better results to show for his cramming. (Podmore 1902:130)

If Puttock–d'Esperance was not a materialization medium in 1875, then how did she become involved in physical mediumship and was it merely through learning the skills or tricks used by Wood and Fairlamb?

The Association of Puttock–d'Esperance with Fairlamb and Wood

In her supposed autobiography, *Shadow Land*, Puttock–d'Esperance records what is her first association with Fairlamb as occurring in the period 1873–1880 and “whose séances for materialization I had more than once attended” (Puttock–d'Esperance 1890:223). If the account is reliable, then Puttock–d'Esperance took part in a spiritualist circle as early as 1873 through her friends Matthews and Grace Fidler (d'Esperance 1897:216). This timeframe approximately fits with the first known reference to Puttock–d'Esperance (although her name was not given as such) by Barkas (1876) in his report entitled “Marvellous Psychological Phenomena.” Barkas states he had been investigating her mediumship for 8 months, the first séance he attended being held in July 1875. According to her book, she began giving her own private séances around 1879 and they were arranged by Matthews Fidler and William Armstrong.

During the 1870s, both Wood and Fairlamb were operating out of the Newcastle Spiritual Evidence Society's (NSES) premises at Old Freemasons Hall, Weir Court, Newgate Street, Newcastle. In March 1876, Wood had ceased involvement with the NSES while Fairlamb remained as the Society's medium until March 1877, at which time she resigned but still held séances there through Armstrong, her manager and one of the founders of the NSES. After her marriage in July 1878, she then as Annie Mellon held séances at her home in Byker Street, Heaton, Newcastle, before seeking new premises, which were eventually located at 28 New Bridge Street, Newcastle (Warwood 2013). This coincided with an announcement in February 1879 referring to Puttock–d'Esperance's coming performances at the same address. Fairlamb–Mellon commenced holding séances at these new premises on March 9, 1879. Then on May 1, 1879, Armstrong, writes:

about twenty ladies and gentlemen met to spend an hour in the séance rooms, . . . During the evening, Madame Esperance read a paper, giving a short but interesting account of her own personal experience, the reading of which gave great pleasure and was highly appreciated by those present. . . . Madame d'Esperance is at present holding clairvoyant séances on the Monday evenings in her séance rooms, 28 New Bridge Street, Newcastle-on-Tyne. (Armstrong 1879)

The point of giving this detail is that these records indicate that during a short period from May until August 1879 both Fairlamb–Mellon and Puttock–d'Esperance were operating out of the same premises. Puttock–d'Esperance held séances for clairvoyance, spirit portraits, and healing diagnosis while Fairlamb–Mellon held her materialization séances on Sunday mornings. This lasted until August 1879 when Fairlamb gave birth to her first child, and for the first time *The Medium and Daybreak* refers to “Mrs. Esperance as holding séances for ‘materialization’ in the absence of Fairlamb–Mellon” (Armstrong 1879, Announcement 1879). From this it is clear that Fairlamb and Puttock–d'Esperance had some level of interaction, and appeared to, on occasion, attend each other's séances, a conclusion that is also supported by Orthwaite's news reports on “Mrs. d'Esperance's seances” (Orthwaite 1879a, 1879b, 1879d). It seems clear then that when Fairlamb–Mellon was no longer able to perform due to childbirth, Puttock–d'Esperance stepped in to become a materialization medium to replace Fairlamb and her career as a ‘medium extraordinaire’ was born. These events are certainly suggestive of complicity, assuming that Wood and Fairlamb–Mellon practiced deliberate and continuous fraud.

By contrast, an extraordinary account is by given by Orthwaite (1879c) of how Puttock–d'Esperance's ability at materialization developed, but here it is attributed to the association of Puttock–d'Esperance with another medium, the medium's good friend, “Mrs. G.” To the modern-day reader, the account of their joint séances appears to read something like a pantomime. There were three adjoined but apparently sealed cabinets, one for each medium and one for the phantom. A performance took place involving numerous phantoms each appearing in succession and then retreating to their assigned cabinet. The author of this account is “F. Orthwaite,” who during this period wrote several accounts of the Puttock–d'Esperance séances, and whose true identity is almost certainly Matthews Fidler, since we know Fidler grew up in the hamlet Orthwaite, Cumberland. That said, the duplicity may have been for a good reason. During the 1870s Fidler was at that time employed as the shorthand clerk and bookkeeper for a solicitor, so the use of a pseudonym may have simply been to protect his employment. The medium identified above only as Mrs. G. would then be his wife Grace.

Matthews Fidler lived at this time very close to Puttock–d'Esperance's residence at 11 Denmark St. in the Newcastle-Gateshead district, one of the poorer areas, and both offered free consultations. Fidler would later under his own name continue to actively publicize Puttock–d'Esperance's ability to create materialized forms, which sitters recognized as relatives or friends (Fidler 1880).

The reader might easily be led to conclude that the phantoms originated entirely in the mind of the Fidlers, but there exist several accounts of the extraordinary experiences of those attending the Puttock–d'Esperance séances in Newcastle. Such an account, for instance, was written by the spiritualist William Oxley (1880:105):

Soon after the meeting commenced, and Mrs. Esperance had taken her seat in her part of the cabinet, a fine stalwart young man pushed the curtains aside, and stood in the opening thus made; he was dressed in a sailor's garb, with loose light-colored overshirt, dark-colored pants, and a blue cloth cap, with a gold lace band round it; he spread out his hands (which were large and well-developed), and, following the maternal instinct which recognized the form as that of her son, the lady rose from her seat, and, in two bounds, the two were clasped in each other's embrace. The effect upon my mind while witnessing this meeting between mother and son was one of deep sympathy and awe; standing, as we were, in the presence of a fact which, in a moment, dispersed to the four winds all the cavils, doubts, and skepticisms.

As with the Fairlamb and Wood cases, materialization séances always entailed the risk that an eager skeptic would grab the spirit and its ectoplasm and reveal this form to be the medium. This happened rather early on in the mediumship career of Puttock–d'Esperance when on August 25, 1880, during a séance in Newcastle, a sitter identified as a Mr. Warnes seized the supposedly materialized spirit of an Arab girl, with the unlikely name "Yolande" (a Germanic rather than an Arabic name). The sitter held on to Yolande, despite being "throttled" by an angry woman sitter, at least until the form was shown to be the medium, lightly clothed because she had left dress and boots behind in the cabinet (Resurgam 1880).

Despite the embarrassing exposure, Spiritualists rallied to the medium's support (Editorial 1880a, Editorial 1880b). For instance, a detailed evidential account (Bates 1880) was immediately published of a séance in North Shields at premises not known to Puttock–d'Esperance and involving the search of the medium by a woman sitter. Despite these precautions, a 3-year old child was seen to appear in the presence of the medium. To counter the imposture accusation, it was emphasized that in this case the

so-called spirit Yolande and the medium even responded to the request to be seen together. There is no evidence that Puttock–d’Esperance ever used accomplices, so clearly there is some enigma surrounding her performances that requires explanation, to which we will return to later.

In her book *Shadow Land*, Puttock–d’Esperance expresses her indignation over, as she sees it, the grabbing of her spirit form as a violation of her integrity: She writes: “All I knew was a horrible excruciating sensation of being doubled up and squeezed together, as I can imagine a hollow gutta percha doll would feel, if it had sensation, when violently embraced by its baby owner” (d’Esperance 1897:298). Appealing to the reader’s sympathy, she then tells how she developed a prolonged illness, which delayed her plans to depart with the Fidler family to Gothenburg.

Critics naturally suspected that the move to Gothenburg provided a means of fleeing from the public scandal in Newcastle (McCabe 1920), but this is contradicted by the account of the above exposure which is said to have taken place at the “final weekday séance before leaving England” (Resurgam 1880:580). In *Shadow Land* (pp. 296–297), it was also recorded that the departure had already been planned in order to accompany Grace [Fidler].

The Gothenburg Séances

Whether planned or not, this relocation to Sweden was enabled by the unfaltering support of the English merchant Matthews Fidler, whose business was now based in Sweden. At least part of the 1880s were spent at the rural Alster Hall near Karlstad in the Swedish county of Warmland where Fidler’s business enterprise was initially located. In Chapter 22 of her book, Puttock–d’Esperance states that following the Newcastle exposure, she was for some years at least publically inactive as a medium. It would seem now from her biographical account that she had attained the life of a society medium giving occasional private séances and spending her time idyllically “roaming the forests, riding, and sailing on the lakes” in a country that, much in contrast to today’s secular and technological Sweden, was populated by “God fearing folk with hard and poor lives.” It was in Warmland during 1883 that Puttock–d’Esperance met and gave séances for Sweden’s foremost poet, Gustav Fröding (Lindström 1957). In a lecture given in London in 1905 she even claimed that during this time she and her benefactor Matthews Fidler had a continual dialogue with the ghost of Fröding’s grandfather. This was Jan Fröding who had owned the Alster estate, and Fidler consulted with this ghost when introducing modern dairy farming techniques from his own agricultural background in Northern England (d’Esperance 1905).

Eventually her benefactor, Matthews Fidler, progressed from managing the Alster estate to owning his own firm exporting dairy goods from Gothenburg to England, and by the late 1880s Puttock–d'Esperance was at least nominally employed as a cashier in his firm, and was part of the Fidler family living in Gothenburg (Bjerre 1958).

By the late 1880s and early 1890s, Puttock–d'Esperance began a new life now in Gothenburg as a “society medium” among the richer families there. Among others, she attracted the industrialist Alexander Keiller, who originated from a Scottish family and was a successful entrepreneur with a deep interest in hypnosis and occult phenomena. Just how much Keiller regarded these séances as theatrical plays and how much belief he placed in the performances remains unclear (Bjerre 1958). Whatever the case, her reputation was now growing again, so much that she became known as “The Gothenburg medium” (McCabe 1920:212).

Progressing now from these occasional private séances, which involved the apparent clairvoyant reading of the content of envelopes and sketching of spirit forms, Puttock–d'Esperance returned in the late 1880s to give more regular materialization séances with larger groups of sitters (Bjerre 1958). She had also developed an interest in photography, and she describes in her autobiography that after “experimenting” for many hours she was able to produce “ghost photos” of the spirits that she could visualize. Like other contemporary spirit photos of that era, those she reproduced in her book simply appear to be no more than double exposures. Some of the fascination that she had with photographic images and the belief that this could reveal the spirit world became the theme of a contemporary drama–documentary on her early life (Beloff 2001).

The introduction of photography into the séance room not only produced “spirit photographs,” but it inevitably put mediums at risk for a different type of exposure. Rather than simply grabbing the medium in the dark, photography could now more subtly and with less disruption disclose what was happening. It was in Gothenburg in 1890 that a series of photographs from the Puttock–d'Esperance séances was published that revealed just that.

The Puttock–d'Esperance version of this event is described in Chapter 22 of her autobiography, and this can be compared with newspaper articles based on notes and with the original glass photo plates from the séance, which took place on March 13, 1890. All this material is to be found in the Torsten Hedlund Archive of the University of Gothenburg Library, and it is this material that we now summarize.

Several detailed articles appeared in major newspapers in March and April of 1890 based on the primary one, which was the account of five

séances given in *Göteborgs Handels and Sjöfarts Tidning* (Gothenburg's Trading and Shipping News) written by Torsten Hedlund. Hedlund was the son of the Editor of that newspaper, and had attended the séances along with a photographer. The article was not just intended as an exposure of the Puttock–d'Esperance mediumship, but was also a direct attack on the newly founded Gothenburg Society for Psychical Research, which seems to have been founded on the initiative of Matthews Fidler. The complaint was that rather than carrying out proper research as the Society's title professed, this Society had allowed Puttock–d'Esperance to trick the sitters by materializations that consisted merely of dolls and masks (Hedlund 1890).

These séances took place in Fidler's home, located at Drottninggatan 3 in the center of the city, in early March 1890, during which Hedlund made detailed notes. These notes, with reference to the photographs, formed the basis for the newspaper report. Hedlund described materialized forms known to the medium and the sitters as "Walter" and "Yolande," and finally what was described as an unknown "young, beautiful woman." All of these forms appeared from out of the medium's cabinet. What Hedlund called in his article "magic tricks" were, in making plants appear, a distinctive part of the medium's repertoire. At one point, the séance escalated to an apparently unprepared-for drama when what seemed to be a decapitated form came out of the cabinet whereupon the medium screamed, causing one of the sitters to enter the cabinet and discover a miniature head (presumably belonging to the decapitated body) among drapery lying beside the medium.

Using the magnesium flash photography of the day to illuminate the scene, 5 pictures were taken (these photos were taken directly from the glass plates in the Archive). Figure 1 reveals the medium dressed up enacting the role of Yolande (the supposedly Arab girl). In Figure 2, the medium is wearing a mask of a woman with the edge of it clearly seen tied to the medium's forehead (as enlarged in Figure 6b compared with Figure 6a). In Figure 3, the medium is seen together with a pile of drapery enclosing what appears to be a mask in it, whereas Figure 4 shows the medium sitting alongside what may be the same mask as in Figure 3. Finally, in Figure 5, the medium can be identified by her body length and hands, enacting the spirit Walter by means of wearing a moustache or mask (as enlarged in Figure 6c and compared with Figure 6a). Hedlund (1890) comments that some of the masks were well-constructed and that the medium's movements were carried out in a convincing manner. Sometimes the voice of the medium even appeared to come from the cabinet, which led Hedlund to speculate that some form of ventriloquism was involved (although how this would work without a doll is not known).

The Hedlund Archive includes clippings from several other Gothenburg



Figure 1. Madame d'Esperance.



Figure 2. Madame d'Esperance wearing the mask of a woman with the edge of it tied to the forehead (see enlargement in Figure 6b).



Figure 3. Madame d'Esperance with a pile of drapery enclosing the mask.



Figure 4. Madame d'Esperance sitting alongside the mask in Figure 3.



Figure 5. Madame d'Esperance as Walter with a moustache and/or mask (see enlargement in Figure 6c, as compared with Figure 6a).

newspapers as well as an angry letter from Fidler maintaining the medium's unquestionable integrity and innocence. The Archive shows how this exposure caught the public's interest for the next two weeks with numerous letters being sent to the Editors, both those denouncing the séances as pure *humbug* (the same word is used in Swedish) and those declaring the medium to be an innocent victim of the Editor's betrayal of the medium's trust. Bjerre in his account (written in 1894) recalls how the debate culminated in a photo (Figure 4) showing the medium and what appears to be a mask attached to drapery being exhibited in the Gothenburg bookshop.

The Puttock–d'Esperance version of these events is similar to that in Newcastle: She expresses indignation over the mistrust and deceit, but the

account is again devoid of any real substance or explanation for what occurred. Reference is made to an account said to be deposited in the Gothenburg Dickson Library, but a later attempt by Poul Bjerre (1958) to locate this document proved unsuccessful. With some apparent audacity, Puttock–d'Esperance published in her book edited versions of photos 1 and 3 from the Hedlund series (Figure 1 and Figure 3) and two new photographs



Figure 6. Madame d'Esperance (6a), enlargements of Fig. 1 (6b) and Fig. 5 (6c).

taken in June 1890 during the visit of Aksakov to Gothenburg (d'Esperance 1897). The latter ones are similar to the Hedlund photo (Figure 4) with the medium and an alleged spirit form, and the effect is to make them appear less incriminating than those in the Archive.

The visit of Aksakov in June 1890 was also marked by the sudden appearance of the exotic flower Golden Lily in a flowerpot prepared jointly by her spirit form Yolande and Aksakov. Remarkably, this plant was said to have grown to close to 2 meters in Fidler's and Aksakov's presence (d'Esperance 1897: Chapter XXIII) (see Figure 7).

These photographic incidents reported in the newspapers do not end entirely there in 1890, because the Archives contain a curious postscript to these séances, dated 1922, 42 years later. In this account, Hedlund still maintained that the medium used tricks, but he now wishes to document there were aspects to the séances he witnessed (that he apparently had not made public at the time) that led him to believe that Puttock–d'Esperance could after all produce genuine phenomena. These said phenomena included 'emanations' from her that which were "shiny and fluttering," and which reached him and his wife's hands and took the appearance of a face, which gradually became diminished in size and disappeared.

We shall return to some of these aspects later, but it is clear that this exposure did not deter the further activities of Puttock–d'Esperance as a medium in Scandinavia. She continued to give séances in the early 1890s, not only in Gothenburg but also in Stockholm, Olso, and Helsinki. Some of the accounts of these séances are summarized here because they can give further insight into the processes that lay behind the extraordinary experiences of the sitters.

In Stockholm, the rather well-known Swedish army major and theosophy author Oscar Busch attended a séance in January 1893 in which a sitter embraced her dead son; however, the careful inquiry afterward by Busch revealed that during the embrace the mother felt that the face was



Figure 7. Madame d'Esperance and the 7-foot Golden Lily.

embedded in a thin, damp veil, of which she could feel the tissue and small folds (Busch 1893).

Among the series of documented séances in Olso (then called Kristiania) in March and June 1892, there was one that followed the earlier content from Newcastle involving the materialization of a “small child,” which might have been an illusion created by the medium crawling (allegedly used at times by the Newcastle mediums Wood and Fairlamb) or by the use of a doll. However, for some of the Oslo séances, the medium would purposely sit outside the cabinet, which she had vowed to do since the Newcastle exposure, in order to reassure the sitters that she was not impersonating the “spirit” form. Many sitters became thus convinced by the appearance of various light forms while the medium was apparently seen still sitting in her place (Halversen 1893). There was one occasion when the séance apparently did not go according to plan, and this might give insight into what had actually been taking place. On this occasion, the materialized form became caught on a fixture on the cabinet, as a result of which a small part of the spirit’s cloth tore off. Later a corresponding hole was found in the medium’s black dress (Editorial 1892:147). Even so, Spiritualists still maintained that this occurred as part of the process of dematerialization of the spirit form back into the medium.

A further séance was carried out in Oslo the following year, April 1893, during which wax-casts were created from the spirit forms, with claims that the narrowness of the cast at the wrist for the hand to exit was evidence of dematerialization. Carrington (1920) would later reveal there was a technique that mediums used to produce this deception. Moreover, two participants were allowed to take a small sample of the material belonging to the spirit form. Examination by a textile shop showed it to be very thin silk (Garborg 1899).

The Helsinki Séance: A Case of Partial Dematerialization

Aksakov had attended materialization séances in June 1890 in Gothenburg, and he would later write the Introduction to Puttock–d’Esperance’s *Shadow Land*. It may well have been the case that he needed here to reconcile his absolute trust in the medium’s authenticity with the obvious resemblance of the materializations forms to the medium or to cardboard cut-outs. He also knew of the Newcastle exposure, which revealed the medium to have been enacting the role of a spirit form. A common counter-fraud explanation that was current at the time and still occurs (Inglis 1979) is that the medium’s body emanated the psychic material that was used to build the form and thus half-formed entities appeared to resemble cut-out faces. If the spirit was seized, the medium and spirit would simultaneously become one entity again. In

spite of the implausibility and logical incoherency in this argument, this way of thinking formed the background to Aksakov's often-quoted report "A Case of Partial Dematerialization of a Medium" (Aksakov 1898).

The séance took place at Senior Lecturer Max Seiling's home in Helsinki on December 11, 1893. Although Aksakov was not present, he collected testimony from the 15 sitters, some of whom saw various luminous forms appear while Puttock-d'Esperance was apparently under close observation. What made this occasion even more remarkable was that while she was sitting on her chair, 5 of the witnesses were allowed to examine her body and they found the lower part to be missing or, as Aksakov interprets it, "dematerialized."

This report by Aksakov became subject to a systematic and critical analysis of witness reports by the psychical researcher and magician Hereward Carrington (1907). Carrington points out that the observations were made in a darkened room and that the witnesses were far from being in agreement with each other about what they experienced. Only one witness, professor Max Seiling, made an "emphatic positive statement," and only one other could give a detailed collaborative account of the appearance of a luminous figure from the cabinet. Carrington further points out that there were two major weaknesses: No examination of the medium was made prior to the séance, and the accounts were written 5 weeks after the event in response to requests from Aksakov. Moreover, one of the witnesses, although not placed as close to the medium as many sitters, suspected that "the whole thing was done with 'dolls and gutta-pecha hands', adroitly handled by the medium, but at the same time he was unable to show how she did it" (Carrington 1907:136 footnote).

For Carrington, the *modus operandi* was not difficult to imagine. Given that the medium sat in front of and very close to the curtain of the cabinet (Figure 8), Carrington reasons that she could have extended an arm behind the curtain and manipulated some of her props in order to represent a spirit. The use of telescopic arms (common among fraudulent mediums of this



Figure 8. Re-enactment of the Helsinki Seiling séance, with the role of the medium taken by Vera Hjelt (wealthy businesswoman at the time and later one of the first female members in the Finnish parliament).



Figure 9. William Marriot's collection from the *Ghosts with Ghosts* catalog circulated among mediums in 1901.



Figure 10. Fairlamb-Mellon with her "Cissie" materialization.

period) would have increased this possibility. In addition, the use of dolls and masks as fake spirits by fraudulent mediums of that era was well-documented by the magician William Marriot (Figure 9). A case in point concerns the "spirit child" Cissie, who appears in photos taken with the medium Fairlamb-Mellon. Elisabeth Warwood sent these to an expert on dolls of the period who was emphatic that the images of "Cissie" in the photos (e.g., Figure 10) were *not* of any known doll or automaton of the period. Nevertheless, it is possible that Cissie was merely a mask made from papier-mâché. As the photos here reveal, Puttock-d'Esperance sometimes used masks.

The remaining enigma concerns the claimed dematerialization of the medium's lower body. According to Carrington, raising the body and repositioning the legs so that they extended backward to the ground through the back supports of the chair could achieve an illusion of dematerialization. Seiling, at whose house the séance took place, objected to this by maintaining that the space $11\frac{1}{2}$ by $7\frac{1}{2}$ inches would not have allowed this, but Carrington

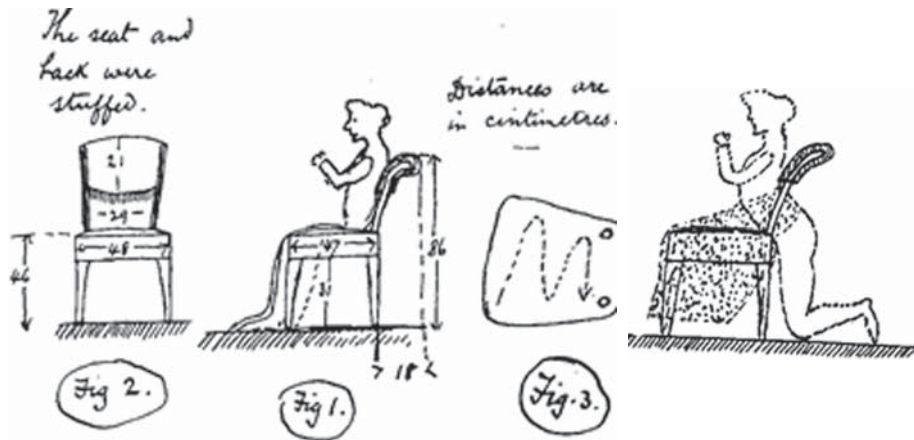


Figure 11. Illustrations by Carrington to show how the “dematerialization” could be duplicated.

was able to demonstrate how it was possible to do even in an unobtrusive manner (Seiling 1907) (see Figure 11).

Puttock–d’Esperance (d’Esperance 1897:409) would later in her book *Shadow Land* describe how this experience at the Helsinki séance proved greatly traumatic, so much so that her hair temporarily turned white and she was forced to take two years of rest from her practice of mediumship. It appeared that the next reported séance was in November 1895 and took place in Gothenburg at the home of Fidler. Once again, Aksakov (1897b) does not seem to have personally attended but collected and collated testimonies from the witnesses. Several of the witnesses testified that Madame d’Esperance sat outside the cabinet while various spirit forms manifested, and one of the sitters recognized her dead husband. Since in most cases the forms were described as lacking the lower body and having a diffuse facial form, in explanatory terms these aspects fit with the more natural explanations discussed here later.

It would seem that from this time onward Puttock–d’Esperance left the employment of Fidler and traveled in France and Germany. One text (Carleson 2008) claims she married Mathews Fidler, but this seems to have been a mis-translation of Bjerre’s account from Swedish to German and then via Danish back into Swedish. In her short dismissive reply in 1907 to Hyslop concerning Carrington’s suppositions, Puttock–d’Esperance gives her current address as Schloss Luga in Saxony, Germany. Her palatial residence suggests that Madame d’Esperance had by this time succeeded in

transforming herself in Germany into a high society medium. Who her new sponsor was is unclear.

The Psychology of the Puttock–d’Esperance Mediumship

In 1887 the Society for Psychical Research published a series of demonstrations by the amateur conjuror S. J. Davey of how false perception and false memory can determine what is reported during a séance. With the help of an accomplice who used a cardboard mask coated in luminous paint, perceptual experiences were induced in witnesses that were typical for the Puttock–d’Esperance séances. Phantom spirits were seen and false memories given (Hodgson & Davey 1887). There is also a more contemporary series of studies of fake séances carried out by Wiseman and his colleagues. After being asked to bring about movement of objects in a darkened room, 27% of the participants reported believing that this had occurred. Suggestions from an actor performing in the role of the medium influenced about 31% of the participants to believe the table had moved, with significantly more believers reported in these events (Wiseman 2010).

Perhaps the most relevant study is another classical one by Theodore Besterman (1932), who carried out a fake séance in which the sitters were told their observational powers were being tested. Despite this challenge, one-quarter of the 42 sitters failed to report a disturbance that had been pre-arranged to occur at a certain point in time and three-quarters of them failed to notice that Besterman had briefly left the room. Thirteen sitters experienced illusions or hallucinations during the séance, most often concerning the movement of objects such as the table and in one case the appearance of a light.

A more general conclusion from this kind of work has been given to us by the contemporary psychologist and Nobel Prize winner Daniel Kahneman (2012), who cautions that before giving credibility to an observer’s judgment, we need to first assess how competent the observer is in dealing with the environment in which he makes the judgment. Most observations of materializations have been made by naïve, unskilled observers in unusual and less than optimal conditions.

Human perception can be inaccurate even under normal conditions as regards details of events and is definitely not equipped to make judgments about unusual events in darkened rooms. Lowered gas-lighting with its shadows can presumably create its own illusory effects.

All this indicates that skepticism as to the reality of what was observed and reported at the Puttock–d’Esperance séances, is entirely justified. However, one question remains. Since there is no evidence that the medium made any use of accomplices, what caused so many sitters to become

convinced they had met and interacted with their dead relatives?

Two concepts in modern cognitive psychology are relevant here. The first is *inattention blindness* (illustrated by the well-known film clip: “Did you see the gorilla?”), which demonstrates that humans constantly miss unexpected intrusions into their perceptual field. The second is *change blindness*, which concerns our inability to notice unexpected alterations in what we are observing. That human perception is prone to such misidentifications is illustrated in Sweden every year during the moose-hunting season, when, despite strict precautions concerning target identification, fatal shootings of fellow hunters occur.

Both these concepts are part of a broader notion that much of the world we experience on an everyday basis is actively created by memory and expectations. These concepts are part of so-called *top down processes*, which refer to how higher brain processes steer perception (Rose 2006). This explains how under conditions of minimum stimulation (such as a darkened séance room) when a person is presented with ambiguous stimuli (such as a diffuse mask or even a piece of linen or gauze fabric), the brain will interpret this in a manner that is consistent with emotional expectancy (such as the need for a reunion with a loved one). Co-author Elisabeth Warwood noticed an example of such ambiguity present in the Hedlund photo (Figure 1). She draws attention to the shape on the right-hand side (shoulder, etc.) in Figure 1 and that of the medium in Figure 3.

The tendency of observers to attribute meaning when confronted with ambiguous and incomplete stimuli, or so-called *pareidolia*, is particularly well-researched in the auditory area (Nees and Philips 2014). To his credit, Bjerre, when commenting on the face he saw appear at one of the Puttock–d'Esperance séances, which gradually diminished in size, wrote that this may have been a perceptual illusion, especially given that other sitters did not report it (Bjerre 1958).

The above account can easily give the impression that significant advances have been made in cognitive psychology since the 1880s that explain how mediums can perceptually deceive sitters. However, this progress seems doubtful when we read Eleanor Sidgwick's report from 1886 on physical mediumship, a report which received even the accolade of the journal *Science* (Editorial 1886). Sidgwick writes:

Our conclusions as to what we see or hear are always founded on a combination of observation and inference; but in daily life it is seldom necessary to distinguish between the two elements, since, when the object and its mode of presentation are familiar, our inferences are generally correct. But it is different when, owing to circumstances, such as a bad light, we have to infer more in proportion to what we perceive than usual; or when someone,

e.g., a conjurer or a ventriloquist, is trying to deceive us by presenting one object under the familiar aspect of another and suggesting false inferences. It is not uncommon to find people at séances encouraging each other in the belief that they see, say, a living human figure, when all that they actually see is something moving which is about the size of a human being; the rest is inference. (Sidgwick 1886:63)

What seems clear from these considerations is that some of the above-mentioned accounts of the séances (e.g., by Busch 1893, Garborg 1899) suggest that Sidgwick's principles were at work during Puttock–d'Esperance's Scandinavian séances.

The question still remains, is there then any evidence that the Puttock–d'Esperance mediumship demonstrated any paranormal aspects? One case, which is often claimed to be evidential, concerns the identification of Sven Strömberg presented in the book *Shadow Land*. It was claimed that Puttock–d'Esperance, through automatic writing, supposedly under the direction of her spirit form “Walter,” gave a notification of Strömberg's death in a settlement in “New Stockholm, America.” New Stockholm was after a search found to be in Manitoba, Canada, where eventually a recent death of a “Sven Stromberg” was said to be confirmed (d'Esperance 1905). “Sven Strömberg,” however, is not an uncommon name in Sweden and when the mass immigration from Sweden to Canada in the late 1880s is taken into account, it is not so unlikely to find someone fitting this description. Other details of the Strömberg family were given and even a “spirit photograph” was said to be validated by those who knew Strömberg. Unfortunately, the whole case seems to rest on the words of Puttock–d'Esperance and Fidler.

There is also one other case, documented by the physician and psychotherapist Poul Bjerre (1958), which is worthy of some consideration. During one of the séances that Bjerre attended, messages were rapped from “William Edwards,” who had died within the last few days in Frederiksberg, Denmark. This was verified the next day from the death announcements in a Danish newspaper. The newspaper was, however, from 4 days before the séance. Moreover, the crucial aspect in such cases was missing: information that the mediums could not have obtained in advance by normal means.

The only remaining enigma concerns the medium's ability to materialize a seemingly endless number of flowers. Bjerre went so far as to visit all the flower shops in Gothenburg without resolving the mystery. Victorian skirts could have provide a convenient repository for many of the props needed for séances—perhaps even for smaller roses and other flowers, but the nearly 7-foot-tall Golden Lily remains a mystery.

Was Puttock–d'Esperance then simply an unscrupulous, underprivileged, but gifted woman who attained her position as a society medium by the use

of trickery and exploitation of the bereaved?

As with many cases of mediumship from this period, this naturally raises the question of conscious versus unconscious deception, or perhaps more specifically, the issue of whether fraud of this elaborate and planned kind can occur in dissociated or trance states.

Despite the fact that Carrington was convinced that Puttock–d'Esperance should not be considered a trance medium (in the sense of how the word was at that time understood) in that she often remained in verbal contact with the sitters, he nevertheless believed in the possibility that the fraud was performed entirely unconsciously. In support of the presence of dissociation in the case of Puttock–d'Esperance, there is a commonly quoted description given in her autobiography of how it felt to be both the medium herself and the “materialized form.” In this case, the form is called “Anna”:

Certainly they are my lips that are being kissed. It is my face that is wet with the tears which these good women are shedding so plentifully. Yet how can it be? It is a horrible feeling, thus losing hold of one's identity. I long to put one of these hands that are lying so helplessly, and touch someone just to know if I am myself or only a dream—if Anna be I, and I am lost as it were, in her identity. (d'Esperance 1897:346)

The above description can naturally be seen as consistent with the contemporary diagnosis of “dissociative identity disorder” (DID), which is a reformulation of the classical concept of multiple personality in terms of profound disturbances in memory and identity. Yet, some authorities consider dissociation including DID to be no more than an extreme form of roleplaying (see Lilienfield, Lynn, & Lohr [2004] for a critical review). Indeed, flexibility in roles can be healthy if there is awareness and control. There are many examples in the normal population where individuals such as actors or rock stars have several identities as, for example, shown by Iron Maiden's front man, Bruce Dickinson, who is both a successful rock singer and a pilot. Obviously, some dual identities can be incompatibly pathological. A recent dramatic example of this is the case of Göran Lindberg, retired Chief of Police in Uppsala and former head of the Swedish National Police Academy. Lindberg was well-known in Sweden for his extreme support of feminism and morality issues in the police force, yet he was discovered to be a frequent visitor to prostitutes, and was finally convicted of pimping, procuring, and multiple rape charges (Anthony 2010).

Clearly, this illustrates that complex conscious planning and actions can be carried out that are not congruent and far from fully integrated with the usual social identity of the person.

Braude (1995), however, notes that what distinguishes role playing

and normal dissociative phenomena from dissociative identities (multiple personalities) is that in the latter, there are particularly profound disparities with regard to the way the different identities experience or believe mental and physical states to be their own. Although this gives the different identities their own life beyond mere role playing, Braude nevertheless argues that they share an even deeper underlying unity.

From this point of view, it would seem that in the case of Puttock–d’Esperance, at one level the medium perceived her mission in life was to promote hope of an afterlife, while at another level, her enactments were the means of gaining affection and recognition for doing so. The use of “props” and enactments enabled the fulfilling of both these goals. The latter side may well have had its own identity. Although the evidence is circumstantial, it is entirely possible that it was this side of Puttock–d’Esperance that received tutoring in trickery from the Newcastle mediums Wood and Fairlamb. But were Grace and Matthews Fidler also part of that deception?

To imagine that the Fidlers wouldn’t know the medium was cheating, when they lived in close proximity to her for so many years, is hard to conceive. Yet, both of them remained committed Spiritualists for the rest of their lives. Matthews Fidler was throughout the years a vocal supporter, not just of Puttock–d’Esperance but of the Spiritualist movement in general. In his personal and business life he appears to have been regarded in Sweden as a much-respected man of great integrity according to an obituary (Anonymous 1901). The Fidlers gained no apparent financial advantage from Puttock–d’Esperance’s activities, nor did they seem to gain in terms of fame by association. The same seems true of William Armstrong, both in his relationship with Wood and Fairlamb and with Puttock–d’Esperance at New Bridge Street. If they were fraudulent throughout this period, how could he not have known, given his close involvement? He remained a committed Spiritualist until his death in 1893. While Armstrong acted as Fairlamb’s ‘manager,’ it seems it was a role he took on to protect her rather than as a means of making money from her mediumship. Furthermore, both Fidler and Armstrong had down-to-earth jobs: Fidler as a merchant and Armstrong as a master block and mast maker. Was it a form of folie à trois or even folie à quatre that enabled the deception to survive?

Perhaps if we extend this folie à quatre further, then we can understand some of extraordinary experiences in the context of the reality that was created by the Spiritualism of that time. In this respect, modern cognitive psychology still has not fully come to terms with the extent to which “consensus reality” is created by so-called “concept-driven perception.” Research on hypnosis is regrettably far from integrated into psychology, but it has shown that, without formal hypnotic induction, simply by

manipulating expectancies and motivations of sensitive individuals, major changes in perceived realities can be created (see Parker 2015a, 2015b for reviews).

The reactions of the Spiritualist editorial and other contributions to the reports on the Newcastle seizing of “Madame d’Esperance” reveal something of this altered reality. Even a sitter who was closely involved in the seizing of the medium believed fully in an innocent explanation: He was convinced that spirits had a role in causing her impersonation since the real Yolande looked more beautiful and taller than the medium as the imposter (Resurgam 1880)! For his part, Armstrong, who was also present at the seizing, found an explanation in his belief in de-materialization and re-materialization taking place between the spirit and medium. He asserts in her defense:

Husbands have met their wives, wives met their husbands; parents have met and acknowledged their long lost children; children have recognized and embraced their parents; forms have grown up in their presences, passed before them, and again dematerialized; forms have been seen without heads, and heads have been seen rolling on the floor, laughing without a body; flowers and plants and fruits have been produced under exceptional circumstances; sitters have seen the medium brought out of the cabinet by the forms; they have seen these forms dematerialize along side her and again built up; all these things and much more through the mediumship of Mrs. D’Esperance. . . . (Armstrong 1880:581)

There is a remarkable aspect of the recognition of deceased loved ones that is rarely if ever commented on: Despite recognizing and even embracing their loved ones, the bereaved never appear to attempt to prolong their brief reunited contact with the deceased. It may be that at some level they realize it is a transient perception that they are at least part of and which cannot be indefinitely maintained and perhaps they even do not wish to confront its basis.

Finally, a possible “elephant in the room” must be mentioned. Trickery and dark séance rooms may be conducive to not only skepticism about the claims of mediums but also to the occurrence of genuine paranormal phenomena among the fake ones (Batcheldor 1984, Hansen 2001). Alan Gauld notes that the Trinity College investigators “felt (no doubt justly) that even though there might be a residuum of phenomena difficult to explain, further investigations would probably prove a waste of time, trouble, and money” (Gauld 1968:128). If so, and it is a big if, it does mean that it becomes an *almost* intractable problem to solve where objective reality lies—assuming one exists at all (see Parker 2010 for further discussion).

The social–cultural context of gender roles in this reality is also a factor deserving mention. The feminist writer Marlene Tromp uses Madame d’Esperance as one of the main illustrative examples in her book *Altered States: Sex, Nation, Drugs and Self-Transformation in Victorian Spiritualism*. The book focuses on the theme of how the mediumship of this period allowed women to achieve

. . . a blurring of identities, and storytelling that followed them were all means of assessing altered states, sites of intellectual, emotional, physical, spiritual, refiguration. This refiguration made paradigm shifts possible, opened doors to other ways of perceiving the world. (Tromp 2006:4)

Rather than focusing on questions concerning the authenticity of the phenomena, Tromp, like some writers (Oppenheim 1985, Owen 1989, 2006, Herr & Wolfram 2009) regards the role of the medium in the Victorian period as being a liberating one (Tromp 2006:5).

Co-author Elisabeth Warwood, who is a historian of Spiritualism, adds: I have spent almost six years researching Annie Fairlamb–Mellon and, perhaps, having gathered every reference to her in Spiritualist and other publications worldwide, I find it hard to just call her a simple, fraudulent medium. There was more to her, and perhaps also to d’Esperance, but only further research would make that clear. The motivations of those who became mediums, then, and today for that matter, are far more complex than people seem to understand or appreciate.

It is beyond the scope of this Perspective to further follow the later “self re-inventions” and “self-transformations” of Madame d’Esperance. . . . However, the account given by Puttock–d’Esperance found in the archives of the College of Psychic Studies tells us that her later years were spent in Germany where, if she is to be believed (the persistent question), she was during World War I arrested as an English spy and at one point threatened with execution. It is known that she finally resided in Copenhagen, where her urn is now preserved at the Bispebjerg Graveyard.

One aspect of Madame d’Esperance has attained something of longevity, if not immortality. The library of the Danish Society for Psychical Research still keeps some of the flowers, now pressed, that she claimed to have materialized (Claudewitz 2011, 2012).

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