

BOOK REVIEW

This House is Haunted: The Amazing Inside Story of the Enfield Poltergeist by Guy Lyon Playfair. Hove, UK: White Crow Books, 2011. 280 pp. \$17.95 (paperback). ISBN 978-1-907661-78-5. [Originally published in the United Kingdom in 1980 by Souvenir Press, 2007 edition published by The History Press]

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.31275/2018/1372>
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This House is Haunted is probably the most popular of the late Guy Lyon Playfair's books. This third edition contains the original text, with minor alterations, a new Preface, and three short Appendixes in which he provides some afterthoughts, suggests further reading, and lastly gives a few suggestions as to "What to Do with your Poltergeist."

The Enfield case is one of the longest-lasting and comprehensive visitations of what I prefer to call Recurrent Spontaneous Psychokinesis (RSPK) in the literature. I say comprehensive because it involved almost all the known phenomena associated with these outbreaks. These included the usual furniture disruptions, "flying" objects, raps and other sounds, levitations of things and people, pools of water appearing out of nowhere, stones falling from the ceilings and flung at others outside from "many directions," written messages (on paper, but at least one, spelling "shit" on a wall, in excrement!), dematerialization/rematerialization of objects, spontaneous fires, direct voices, and so on. Objects as light as LEGOs were thrown, but a very heavy gas fire iron frame cemented into the brickwork was wrenched from a wall as well.

The phenomena were influenced by the comments, interests, and even thoughts of participants and visitors. For instance, when a student physicist who'd been working on metal bending came to stay, metal objects began bending. Soon after the news that another RSPK outbreak had occurred nearby in which fires were spontaneously started and extinguished, fire, similar to those observed by Playfair in the other house, broke out at Enfield. At the very moment Maurice Grosse, actually the primary investigator of the case, mentally wondered what "it would think of next," a loud crash announced that a framed sports certificate, which had been securely fastened to the wall, had been dislodged and knocked over a tape recorder as it fell.

Oh yes, and as in many investigations of psychokinetic subjects, recorders and other devices often malfunctioned.

Maurice Grosse, an inventor and design engineer, had recently tragically lost his daughter, Janet, in an accident, and he and his family had experienced some odd occurrences at the time that caused him to wonder if she somehow had survived physical death. He had a lifelong interest in psychical phenomena, and, in my opinion from what I've gleaned from the information in the book, had some, perhaps latent, psychic/psychokinetic ability himself. He applied for membership in and was admitted to the Society for Psychological Research.

When the call came in to the SPR asking for an investigator to look into the Enfield case, Grosse eagerly and quickly accepted it. The house was occupied by a Mrs. Harper and her four children: Jimmy, 7, Peter, 10, who was often away at boarding school, Janet, 11, and Rose, 13. It was suspected at first that Janet, who had the same name as Grosse's deceased daughter, was the focus of the activity, but as the phenomena progressed it seemed more likely that Rose and Mrs. Harper were also involved. Grosse spent nights in the house and was kept busy by a dizzying variety of incidents including Janet's chair being balanced atop her bedroom door. When Playfair realized what a difficult and demanding situation Grosse was up against, he volunteered to help in the investigation.

Over the next two years, the phenomena increased in scope and intensity. Although both investigators expressed an awareness that the mayhem might be caused by repressed anger in this rather dysfunctional family, whose father had left them and whose periodic visits to deliver alimony or child support seemed to arouse only resentment, they, especially Grosse, maintained and pursued the belief that these anomalies were being perpetrated by spirits. (For example, Grosse says, "The thing knows they're coming . . ." or "It threw Janet off the chair" rather than "Janet was thrown from the chair.") Of course, the family, it seems, adopted this attitude as well. This belief conveyed by the researchers may have contributed to the unusual length of the outbreak. But with the mindset on spirits causing the PK rather than on living agents, both researchers seemed reluctant, especially Grosse, to look for psychological explanations, and seemed to be more interested in proving the reality of the phenomena than in uncovering the underlying psychological cause. Perhaps if it had been recognized and dealt with and explained to the family, the siege could have ended much sooner. Attributing the phenomena to spirits may have only given permission for it to go on.

At one point Janet was taken to a hospital for evaluation, and under hypnosis when asked who might be causing the trouble, she responded "me and my sister" because of "an increase in unhappiness." She related

that she and Rose were frightened by her estranged father and it was always worse after his Saturday visits. This might be Janet unconsciously feeding back under hypnosis what the psychiatrist wanted to hear, of course, but it seems a lot closer to the truth than the silly and unlikely spirit “messages” they “received.”

That said, the fact that it did go on and evolved in many interesting ways gives us a little more insight into the psychic/physical connections at work in such cases of RSPK. And to be fair, no pun intended, Playfair seems to waver between the “living agent” and “spirit” theories. He welcomed John Beloff and Anita Gregory in the hope that they’d be able to help on the “psychological side,” for he recognized that “poltergeist cases offer rare opportunities to study the interaction of mind and matter” (p. 113). Unfortunately, they spent only a short time at the house and they were able to contribute very little.

I found particularly interesting the role of Mrs. Harper in this case. She would often know when an incident was going to happen, even to predict it. She also seemed physically affected by the phenomena, e.g., when Janet bends a spoon her mother claims she feels a headache come and go “just as it bent.” Another time, after a cardboard box filled with soft cushions was flung at Grosse hitting him on the forehead after he asked “Are you having a game with me?”, Mrs. Harper told Playfair of a strange headache she almost always felt just before something like that happened. “It varies,” she said. “If the ‘thing’ is hanging about, I get a throbbing sensation, and if it’s going to be bad there’s a sort of tight band across the front of my head. And then it will sort of go” (p. 72).

Late in the case when Janet was sent away to stay in a hospital, Janet opined that nothing would happen there because she was “on her own.” “The power can’t build up ’cause there’s no one else to help build it up . . .” (p. 246). Playfair admits: “She and her mother seemed to understand instinctively that the overall family situation was what had caused, or at least helped, the trouble to start” (p. 247).

There was so much obvious anger, aggression, and violence demonstrated, not only in the flinging of objects and excrement, but in the deaths of a fish and a bird, as well as self-punishment especially directed at Janet, that I would have thought that more could have been done to examine



the mental–emotional problems of the family. Again, I think progress in this respect was hampered by the underlying resistance of both investigators to abandon their spirit theory.

As in several cases in the literature (see, e.g., Owen 1976, Owen & Sparrow 1977, Pilkington 2006) in which, following experience with macro-PK, phenomena begin to occur to participants outside of the usual setting, strange things started to happen to Grosse in or near his own home. His car engine revved up and down for no apparent reason, he heard footsteps and other sounds in his house, and finally he experienced what Mary Rose Barrington has termed “JOTT” or “jottles,” i.e. the phenomenon of objects disappearing and later reappearing, or just vanishing for good (Barrington 2018). The day after Grosse checked his wife’s jewels for insurance purposes, particularly noting a valuable diamond ring especially precious to her because it had been her mother’s, the ring disappeared. It was always kept in a dressing table drawer. Of course they searched for it extensively and after six weeks Grosse reluctantly reported it missing to his insurance company. The following morning the ring reappeared in the same drawer from which it had vanished.

Grosse speculated that his late daughter (“*my Janet*”) could be responsible not only for the ring episode but also for drawing his, and Playfair’s, attention to Enfield. This search for a connection to his daughter and his desire to have some “proof” of an afterlife I believe strongly influenced his attitude toward the case.

Having had no success with the psychologists they had consulted, who unfortunately seemed to know nothing about the psychological dynamics involved in psychokinetic phenomena, they brought in still another medium who, with the help of his guide “White Cloud” (in the best traditions of British mediums, a so-called “red Indian”), put on quite a show of talking to resident spirits and so on. But he told Mrs. Harper and the girls that they had the ability “within themselves to stop all these things.” Before he left he gave them some contact healing, placing his hands on their heads and spines. They said they felt the heat coming from his hands, and following his visit the family actually experienced some peace for a short time, but despite Playfair’s and Grosse’s suggestions that the troubles were over, the phenomena started again after a few weeks.

The last medium who was brought in was interesting in that he strongly sensed Grosse’s daughter Janet, who would have been 24 years old.

The “revelation” put the two investigators back onto the spirit explanation, which I think fogged their thinking despite the fact that this medium, when asked how to stop these outbreaks, replied, “Cure the people in the house” (p. 249).

This bit of advice reminded me of Scott Rogo, whose untimely death was a great loss to the field. Scott said that when he investigated a “poltergeist” outbreak his first thought and obligation was to help the family, rather than to just go in to study the phenomena and verify their reality.

In the “Afterthoughts” section written in 2011, Playfair debunks claims made by some journalists that the girls had “confessed” to causing the phenomena and adds some acoustic charts showing, as other researchers have found, that raps heard in the Enfield house and those made by normal means have different sound patterns. He also provides a bibliography for further reading.

This is a very readable, eye-opening book for anyone who is not familiar with the extent and variety of phenomena that have been witnessed in RSPK cases, and even experienced researchers might glean some new insights into the psychology and family dynamics that can underlie these outbreaks.

In my opinion, large-scale psychokinesis, whether spontaneous or produced consciously by gifted individuals, is the most important area of parapsychology. As Grosse remarked to a group of mental health practitioners at Janet’s hospital:

Cases of this type, whatever their true nature, are of great interest because they involve unmistakable interactions between mind and matter. They would seem therefore to be the province of both physicist and psychiatrist.
(p. 234)

And as Playfair adds:

It now seems fairly certain that poltergeists need an atmosphere of group tension in which to operate, and that psychiatrists can help a good deal by dissolving that tension. But it must be up to the physicist to identify the force that turns tables over . . .
(p. 248)

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