

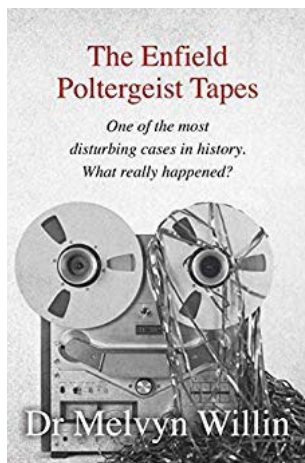
BOOK REVIEW

The Enfield Poltergeist Tapes: One of the Most Disturbing Cases in History. What Really Happened? by Melvyn J. Willin. Milton Keynes, UK: White Crow Books, 2019. 180 pp. \$17.99 (paperback). ISBN: 978-1-78677-073-8.

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The present book provides valuable background information on a controversial poltergeist case that was investigated by members of the Society for Psychical Research (SPR) from September 1977 to summer 1979. One of its chief investigators, Guy Lyon Playfair (1935–2018), publicized the Enfield case in a remarkable book about the reported phenomena in 1980, and second and third editions followed in 2007 and 2011 (Playfair, 2011). While Playfair always admitted that some of the phenomena were staged by the children living in the house, he held the general opinion that the gross majority of the phenomena including the peculiar voices the children spoke with represented genuine poltergeist disturbances. Nevertheless, several other visitors to the Enfield house were much more pessimistic and believed that, most likely, all the phenomena were staged. Willin's book plunges straight into the controversies and quarrels that members of the SPR engaged in during the investigation of the case. In this context, he presents excerpts from previously unpublished material. The most peculiar source is the collection of the hundreds of hours of tape recordings taken by Maurice Grosse, the second chief investigator of the case. Willin listened to all of them and provided a summary of their contents and the most interesting sections. He also presented excerpts from a previously unpublished report written by members of the SPR's "Enfield Poltergeist Investigation Committee" (EPIC), which contains numerous witness testimonies. Furthermore, he asked several people involved in the case to comment on their experiences from today's perspective, and included the received responses in his book as well. In addition, Willin compared the phenomenology of the Enfield case with similar occurrences reported from the "Mount Rainier Case."

Overall, the numerous witness testimonies contained in Willin's book provide a lively overview that highlights different experiences and



interpretations of phenomena from the perspectives of various people involved in its investigation. While some testimonies seem to leave little doubt that the children living in the supposedly haunted house indeed feigned numerous phenomena, other quite intriguing first-hand descriptions of inappropriate behavior of furniture and other physical objects in bright light seem to leave little doubt that genuine anomalies did occur. This latter appraisal is supported by the finding that the rapping and knocking sounds recorded at Enfield displayed unusual acoustic characteristics compared with intentionally produced raps (Colvin, 2010). Hence, the

recorded tapes constitute a valuable body of evidence, and also provide an excellent source of documentation with regard to what happened at which time.

Now, what about the claim contained in the blurb of the book that it would enable readers to “know what really happened” at Enfield? Willin deliberately avoided presenting an analysis and interpretation of the occurrences from his perspective. For my part, I am afraid I still don’t know what “really happened.” Naturally, the acoustic information contained on the tapes alone cannot provide a full picture of the recorded occurrences, and during my studies of alleged physical mediums, I have learned that witness testimonies—both of skeptics and believers—need to be treated with caution, as they don’t necessarily match the facts. Nevertheless, I do know in much more detail what was factually reported and recorded at Enfield, and that most likely the fraudulent production of phenomena played a greater role than one might assume from reading only Playfair’s book. In sum, Willin’s book constitutes an objective and laudable contribution to the controversial field of studies into hauntings and poltergeist cases. It vividly illustrates the difficulties in researching and documenting such anomalous occurrences—thus fitting nicely with a number of other recently published treatises reviewing past cases and their social concomitant circumstances (Evrard, 2019; Mayer, 2019a, 2019b; Nahm, 2019).

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