

Biography of William J. Crawford (1881-1920)

Remembered primarily for his study of Irish medium Kathleen Goligher, William Jackson Crawford was a lecturer in mechanical engineering at Queen's University of Belfast and the Municipal Technical Institute of Belfast. Beginning in 1914, he had 87 sittings with the Goligher Circle over a period of some two-and-a-half years, resulting in four books – *The Reality of Psychic Phenomena* (1918), *Hints and Observations on the Phenomena of Spiritualism* (1918), *Experiments in Psychical Science* (1919), and *The Psychic Structure of the Goligher Circle* (1921). Three of the four books are devoted exclusively to the Goligher Circle. His "Hints" book mentions sittings with other mediums, but it is very general and no names are given.

The Goligher Circle consisted of seven members of the Goligher family – Kathleen, four sisters, their father, and the husband of one sister. Crawford observed that all of Kathleen's sisters had mediumistic ability to some degree, but Kathleen, just 16 when he began studying her, was clearly the most powerful medium of the group. The phenomena included communicating raps, automatic writing, trance voice, floating objects, and table levitations.

Born in New Zealand, Crawford received his D.Sc. from the University of Glasgow and authored several books in his primary field, including *Elementary Graphic Statics* and *Calculations on the Entropy-Temperature Chart*, before undertaking his research of psychic phenomena.

"A number of us had been sitting round a small table in the usual way and had obtained the usual tiltings and usual mixed-up messages, when suddenly the table twisted round under our hands and did not stop until it had turned through nearly a complete revolution," Crawford recalled his introduction to mediumistic phenomena. "It did this

two or three times. The movement, which was so obviously not produced by any of us present and which we did not expect – this simple little turning movement – caused the first glimmer of doubt in my mind that all table tiltings, etc., were due to subconscious actions of the sitters, as I had strongly held up to that time. From that moment – now years ago – I decided to investigate the matter thoroughly."¹

The *modus operandi* of a Goligher sitting, Crawford explained, involved the members sitting in a circle about five feet in diameter with a table placed in the center. A red light was used and was ample enough to see all activity and movement in the room. The sitters would then join hands in chain order as one member of the circle would open with a prayer, after which a hymn would be sung to establish the proper harmony. "In a few minutes, sounds – tap, tap, tap, – are heard on the floor close to the medium," Crawford recorded. "These are the first 'spirit' raps of the evening. They soon become louder and stronger and occur right out in the circle space, on the table, and on the chairs of the sitters. Their magnitude varies in intensity from the slightest audible ticks to blows which might well be produced by a sledge-hammer, the latter really being awe-inspiring and easily heard two stories below and even outside the house. The loud blows perceptibly shake the floor and chairs."²

The raps would sometimes keep time with the hymns sung by members of the circle and at other times they would tap out complicated tunes on top of the table or on the floor. Besides the ordinary raps there were peculiar sounds, one sounding like a bouncing ball, another like the wood being sawed, another like the trotting of a horse.

As the “operators” (Crawford’s name for the “entities”) effecting the phenomena, explained to him, a semi-flexible “psychic rod” (or arm) issues from the body of the medium and is moved up or down to strike the floor or the table, thereby causing the raps, much like one might use a stick to beat a carpet. “I have no doubt whatever that the operators, i.e., the entities producing the phenomena, whether the reader looks upon such entities as spirits, our subconscious selves, or extra-terrestrial intelligences – have to do a good deal of experimenting in order to obtain satisfactory results,” he offered. “I have many times watched them experimenting in order to bring about some particular phenomenon they desired; they would keep trying even after repeated failures, and would not give in until they realized that what they wished was impossible of accomplishment.”³ He further surmised that it requires the cooperation of many unseen entities to produce physical phenomena and that the medium and sitters are only the instruments through whom the work is done.

After 15 minutes or so, the rappings would stop and another type of phenomenon would begin. “The levitation of a table is the most spectacular and common,” Crawford wrote, “but there are also all kinds of motions of the table, upon the floor—transitional, rotational, and combinations of these two. The table is sometimes gently lowered about two legs to the floor and replaced in position. A metal trumpet is waved about in the air. A small handbell is taken up and rung. The sitters are sometimes psychically ‘touched.’”⁴

Crawford brought in a scale large enough to hold the medium while she was sitting in her chair. He discovered that when a table was being levitated, the weight of the table, usually around 16 pounds, was transferred to the medium through the psychic (ectoplasmic) rods extending from her. Most of the time, the transfer of weight would be a few ounces short of the weight of the table. Further experimentation revealed that the extra weight was being transferred to the sitters in the room,

who apparently furnished small amounts of what Crawford calls “psychic force.”

Fraud was definitely not involved, Crawford concluded, pointing out that the subdued light provided adequate visibility to detect movement in the room. Moreover, the medium was not paid and he knew the Goligher family to be upright and religious-minded people. “Her mediumship is absolutely beyond dispute, as many people, some of them well known, are able with certainty to say,” Crawford further wrote. “However, she knows it is my duty to set at rest the minds of those who are afraid of unconscious mediumistic action and the like; of those who, not having been able to attend her séances and see for themselves what actually happens, wish to know what precautions have been taken, and what independent witnesses have to say.”⁵

Crawford reported witnessing hundreds of levitations under all conditions, but apparently the medium herself was never levitated as reported by Sir William Crookes with D. D. Home. In one sitting Crawford observed a stool rise four feet into the air and move gently up and down for several minutes while he examined it closely and while the medium was seated on a weighing machine. He also witnessed a table turn around completely in the air, turn upside down, and settle to ground in the upside-down position.

Sir William Barrett, a respected professor of physics and one of the founders of the Society for Psychical Research, attended one of the Goligher sittings at Crawford’s request and reported climbing on a table being levitated some 18 inches off the floor, after which the table began to sway and he was tipped off. The table then turned upside down and settled back on the floor. When Barrett tried to right it, he could not budge it, but it later righted itself on its own accord. Barrett claimed to have heard an “amused intelligence.”⁶

As for the difference between the contact phenomenon, where the sitters have their hands on the table, and the non-contact type, Crawford understood that the psychic force was coming

through the finger tips of the sitters and was not a result of any muscular action on their part, while in the non-contact type, the medium supplied the psychic arm (ectoplasmic rods). "These invisible psychic arms probably grip the table by adhesion to its under surfaces or legs and thus bring about the movements which appear so mysterious," he wrote.⁷

During his experiments with Goligher, Crawford began communicating with the "operators," one of whom said he was a medical man when on earth and that his primary function was to look after the health of the young medium. This "spirit" explained to Crawford that two types of substances were used in the production of the phenomena. One was taken in large quantities from both the medium and the sitters, then returned to them at the close of the séance. The other substance was taken exclusively from the medium in minute quantities and could not be returned to her as its structure was broken up. It was pointed out that it came from the interior of the medium's nerve cells and if too much were taken she could suffer serious injury.

On one occasion, a clairvoyant joined in the circle and told Crawford that she could see "a whitish vapory substance, somewhat like smoke," forming under the surface of the table and increasing in density as it was levitated. She could see it flowing from the medium in sort of a rotary motion. From other sitters, she could see thin bands joining into the much larger amount coming from the medium. She also saw various spirit forms and spirit hands manipulating the "psychic stuff."

While initially subscribing to the "secondary personality" theory, Crawford gradually changed his mind and concluded that these "operators" were in fact spirits of the dead. "[The subconscious] is the alternative I had in mind all through my investigations," he explained his change of attitude. "As months succeeded month, as each new phase of phenomena was presented, as each new experiment was done, I always said to

myself, 'Can this very determined work of seemingly intelligent beings be but a simulation after all? Can it be all a fraud? Is it possible that nature holds intelligences belonging to ourselves or otherwise, which could so persistently deceive? Why should our subliminal consciousness (supposing we possess such a thing) carry out for us phenomenal demonstrations on the lines of reason and intelligence, requiring effort and system, for the object of deceiving us?' No! It seems most unlikely and repellant to our sense of the fitness of things. Nobody who has not delved deeply into psychic phenomena can have any conception of its tremendous variety and range. It includes telekinetic phenomena, apports, materialization, the direct voice, clairvoyance, clairaudience, trance, etc., etc. There are, in fact, dozens of phases of psychic action, all consistent in the inference to which they lead, namely, that man survives death, and inconsistent on any other hypothesis."⁸

Crawford further concluded that much of what was being looked at as fraud by other researchers and superficial observers were spasmodic kinds of movements by the medium. "These are simply the reactions due to the raps and are what we might expect," he stated. "The seeker after fraud (who by the way is usually a person with no knowledge of science) immediately puts them down to imposture. My experiments, conducted over a long period of time and more thoroughly than any ever carried out hitherto, have proved to me beyond all question that the medium's body is either directly or indirectly the focus of all the mechanical actions which result in phenomena. And not only is it the focus but it also seems to supply a kind of duplicate of portions of her body, which can be temporarily detached and projected into the space in front of her. Thus, things happen in the séance room which, from the nature of the case, sometimes bears a superficial appearance of fraud, though, in a properly conducted circle it is only superficial, and the true and genuine nature of the phenomena can always be discovered by a little investigation."⁹

Crawford asked the operators if there were many of them looking on during the séances. "Whenever asked the questions they would begin rapping and keep on rapping until we were tired of hearing them," he wrote. "They wished to indicate by this that there were great crowds of spirit people looking on. They told me this was the case at all our séances. They gave me the impression that the séance room and the sitters were surrounded by a huge invisible audience arranged in an orderly and disciplinary manner, perhaps tier upon tier as in a lecture theater. The séance to many of them would appear to be as novel as it is to us."¹⁰

It was only during the last six months or so of his investigation that the operators allowed him to photograph the "plasma." He was told initially that the medium would not be able to withstand the shock of the flashlight effect and that it was necessary for the operators to gradually prepare her for it. "After innumerable attempts, very small patches of plasma were obtained in full view between the medium's ankles," he reported. "As time went on these increased in size and variety until great quantities of this psychic stuff could be exteriorized and photographed. Then the operators began to manipulate it in various ways, building it up into columns, or forming into single or

double arms, molding it into different shapes with which I had been long familiar in a general way from previous investigation."¹¹

Crawford died by suicide on July 30, 1920. Skeptics suggested that his suicide was the result of realizing he had been duped. However, four days prior to his death, Crawford wrote to David Gow, the editor of *Light*, the following: "My psychic work was all done before the (mental) collapse, and is the most perfect work I have done in my life. Everything connected with it is absolutely correct, and will bear every scrutiny. It was done when my brain was working perfectly, and it could not be responsible for what has occurred.... I wish to affirm my belief that the grave does not finish all."¹²

In 1922, Dr. E.E. Fournier d'Albe had 20 sittings with Kathleen Goligher and obtained limited results, leading him to report that Crawford must have been tricked. However, defenders of Crawford suggested that d'Albe did not bring the proper attitude or harmony to his investigation, thus discouraging phenomena, or Goligher had lost much of her power as mediums are known to do over time.



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¹ Crawford, W. J., *Hints and Observations on the Phenomena of Spiritualism*, E. P. Dutton & Co., New York, 1918, p. 61

² Crawford, W. J., *Experiments in Psychical Science*, E.P. Dutton & Co., New York, 1919, p. 3

³ Hints, p. 97

⁴ Crawford, W. J., *The Reality of Psychic Phenomena*, E. P. Dutton & Co, New York, 1918, p. 9

⁵ _____, p. 21

⁶ Barrett, William F., *On the Threshold of the Unseen*, E. P. Dutton & Co., New York, 1918, pp. 46-47

⁷ Hints, pp. 73-74

⁸ _____, pp. 101-102

⁹ Experiments, pp. 141-142

¹⁰ Hints, p. 18

¹¹ Crawford, W. J., *The Psychic Structure of the Goligher Circle*, E. P. Dutton & Co., New York, 1921, pp. 171-172

¹² Psychic Structure, preface v