

# The PIONEER

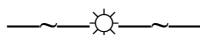
The Pioneer is  
now part of the  
recommended  
reading for the  
Spiritualists'  
National Union's  
education courses.



Helen  
Duncan



**The Pioneer is now part of the recommended reading for the Spiritualists' National Union's education courses. Please reference: "Pioneer, volume, issue and page numbers"**



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**Special thanks to Charles Coulston for his work in sub-editing these issues – also  
acknowledged to Minister David Hopkins and Leslie Price for their past work in sub-  
editing the issues**

# HELEN DUNCAN – TRANCE MEDIUMSHIP

Helen Duncan was well-known for her physical mediumship, especially producing full-form materialisations. She also on occasion demonstrated psychometry and took church services. Below is a rare report on a trance address at Fleetwood Spiritualist Church,<sup>20</sup> given through Helen by her main control, Albert Stewart. This was published in the *Two Worlds* weekly of March 13th 1942:

## BUILDERS OF BRIDGES

*A trance address given by “Albert” through the mediumship of Mrs. Helen Duncan.*

DURING a recent visit to Fleetwood, at which several successful seances for materialization were held, “Albert Stewart” (Mrs. Duncan’s guide) volunteered to address the Sunday evening service at Fleetwood Spiritualist Church. Mrs. Duncan gladly co-operated without fee or reward. Despite the Medium’s Scottish upbringing, it was particularly noticeable that never once was there a trace of a Scottish accent. The clear liquid colonial speech of “Albert” was maintained throughout the address. The following is a short summary of his remarks, which lasted about half an hour.



I can assure you that it gives me pleasure to come and talk to you for a short while. I want to assure you that I am no radiant angel but

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<sup>20</sup> A quote from the *Two Worlds*, February 1st 1924: “THE Fleetwood Spiritualist Society was founded, with the assistance and co-operation of the Blackpool Spiritualist Society, in October, 1911, and rented the Old Bethel Hall in Kemp-street, for their services. The Society decided to become affiliated with the Spiritualists’ National Union, and were taken into affiliation in October, 1916, and was then called the Fleetwood National Spiritualist Church, becoming registered as a place of worship and for the solemnising of marriages. The Lyceum was founded in July, 1912, becoming affiliated with the British Spiritualists’ Lyceum Union in October, 1913.”

Further information: In October 1922 it was decided to work for a church of our own, this was achieved in 1924. The stone-laying ceremony was on February 2nd when stones were laid by E. W. Oaten, S.N.U., George H. Mack, B.S.L.U., and Mrs. J. Butterworth, S.N.U. An impressive grand opening of the church took place on September 13th and 14th 1924. The president was Mr. C. T Batley who we can note chaired the meeting for Helen Duncan. For further information on the history of Fleetwood please contact the editor. Fleetwood Spiritualist Church: <http://www.snu.org.uk/community/churches/fleetwood.html>



just a humble human being like yourselves, endeavouring to be a servant of the greatest Spirit of all. Let us for a while shut out the everyday troubles of your world and spend a short time in the effort to bring your world and mine together.

If all men the world over could be sure that there is another phase of existence when earthly death takes place, what a different world yours would be! I have not —like some—spent hundreds of years on this side of life. I have lived in the same age as you, and know its difficulties. There are many in this church, myself included, who have been indifferent to the existence of a spiritual world. When life flowed on like a stream, with few rocks and cross currents, few of us ever troubled to find out whether there was anything beyond the Bridge of Death. The question never entered into our consideration. But when the current has swept away someone who was part of you, whom you loved and cared for, you were struck dumb. Sorrow roused you, and caused you to say: “I must find out whither they have gone!” There are many such in my audience. You refused to accept the idea that death was the end of all and so you have set out to find out if there is anything substantial in Spiritualism.

My Chairman (Mr. Batley) will have had far more experience in Spiritualism than I had before I came to this side of life, and I am sure he will agree with me that few people realise when they start their investigations that they must start Bridge Building. You yourself must lay foundations for the bridge which will unite your world with ours. First seek out the firmest footing you can find—it may be a small Spiritualist Church or a select circle, but you must build regularly week by week. Kind words and actions, sweet smiles and sincerity, are the stones which will help you to build your bridge. We build from our side in our desire to meet you, and then you find a medium who can form the central pillar, or keystone, and this is the first indication you have that building has been going on from this side as well as yours.

Now success depends on the strength of your Bridge, and whether it is erected on solid pillars and constructed of good material. Do not be surprised if you do not always get the results you expect—or that you do not get evidence every time you attend your church. The strongest pillar sometimes breaks, but once the bridge is completed and you have proved that your loved ones live, then, with the knowledge you have obtained, try to improve your environment. Lay out plantations on the banks of the stream, plant the seeds of knowledge you have gained, and cultivate the flowers of kindness and service. Tell out to others the knowledge you have obtained, that death is not an end but a new beginning. As I wander amongst you, I often hear people say: “Why did God punish me by taking away my loved one?” I venture to say that most of you have had such thoughts. Some day, when you come to this side of life, you will see from another point of view; you will wonder why you ever sorrowed and know that death is just freedom from a physical burden.

There are many differences in our outlook from this side, and the chief of them is that we are only attracted to those we care for. Love is the key to everything!

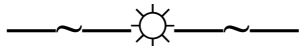
The more experienced of you will agree with me that many who come to investigate this question of survival have no knowledge of the fact that behind all this phenomenal evidence there are deeper teachings, deeper truths. Many of them are looking for sensation, for something which will flood them with limelight. They must learn that substantial Bridges are not sudden thrills—they are not built in a night. Bridges often take years to build on solid foundations. The true developing circle can be a valuable aid in approaching the spirit world. I know the thoughts that are going through many people's minds here: "Oh! such and such a person does not live a good life, how can *they* get in touch with anybody?" I listened to the words which were read from the Bible just now. It is a fact that the Nazarene did not take His disciples because they were good men; He took them because they could become Bridge Builders for Him. Just analyze yourself and find if you are a capable person, and just feel that those around you are there for the purpose of Bridge Building. Never mind what Mrs. So-and-So does. Get down and say to yourself, "Well, I know what I am."

You know, you people have queer ideas about what you call sin. I know what those ideas are, for I only left your world in 1913. It is not the taking of a glass of beer, provided a man knows when to leave it, or an explosion which produces vulgar words (although such things are unwise and unnecessary), that constitute sin. Probably the greatest sin of all is to talk lightly of others who are not there to defend themselves. The people who cannot mind their own business, and defame others in order to distract attention from their own weaknesses, are probably the biggest sinners of all. Such conduct means bad thoughts, and thoughts are real and living things. When you think, let clean thoughts go out from you, and they will return like doves—not as vultures. If you do that you will find that the bricks with which you build will last for all time. Even after you come to our side of life your bridge will still stand and enable you to return to those you love, with comfort and encouragement.

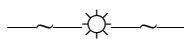
I remember as a young man I had my opinions on religion. Many Sundays I walked the streets of Sydney and watched congregations leaving the churches. I saw their faces: some of them looked as though they had lost their all. They looked miserable, and it was no advertisement for their faith. Some were engaged pulling others to pieces. I want you to go from this church into your everyday life with smiles on your faces and kindness in your hearts: joyous because the bridge between earth and heaven is a reality.

I can stay no longer. I have just explained in a few words the message I would leave with you. Sometime we shall all have an opportunity to meet over here. It will be nice to walk the higher bank

of the stream and find joy in surveying the bridges we have built: to find them easy to cross so that we shall not have to struggle through the mud and slime of ignorance to greet the dear ones we have left. Thank you for your spirit of friendship and your attention. "God be with you till we meet again."



# Helen Duncan & John McIndoe



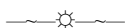
John (Mac) McIndoe

Psypioneer holds a considerable amount of information on Duncan's mediumship and it is strongly recommended that these pages be consulted while looking into her mediumship, as there is a lot of incorrect information and speculation given about her on the internet and in some published reports. The SNU web page, "SNU Presidents", is still not completed at present; we have profiles and information on John Venables (1901), John Adams (1905-1907), George Berry (1920-1922), Frank Blake (1938-1941) and John (Mac) Brown McIndoe (1930-1938). It can be noted in his obituary (May 31st 1958), "It was Mac who launched Helen Duncan on her career as a materialisation medium."<sup>13</sup>

In Psypioneer's issue for February 2015 we looked into Duncan's "Early reports of her mediumship" and found the available accounts of her controls/guides somewhat sketchy and contradictory. The early development of Helen took place in the Duncan's home circle, which consisted of just a handful of sitters, including Helen's husband, Henry, who appears to have started the circle and encouraged the development of his wife's physical mediumship. Hence the early reports of her development and her various controls/guides have surfaced through the Duncan family, for example from one of Duncan's daughters, Gena, who would marry George Brealey and in 1985 published *The Two Worlds of Helen Duncan* with Kay Hunter, originally published by Regency Press.<sup>14</sup>

I believe Gena was born in 1926, so she was only a small child during her mother's development of her physical mediumship in the 1920s. Gena would rely in part on her father Henry's records of his wife's development but after Henry's death circa 1967 much of the documented material was lost in a house fire. Included in the Psypioneer article is what is considered the *first* independent published report on Helen Duncan's physical mediumship, by James Souter, who came into contact with Helen in June 1929. Souter's short article states: "Guides, three in number, are good hard-headed, canny Scotsmen..." John McIndoe was present at the séance reported by Souter and this was published in *Light*, October 19th 1929.

Another independent account can now be added on the early development of Helen's physical mediumship, written by John McIndoe and published in the first Spiritualists' National Union journal, "The National Spiritualist", which was edited by SNU Secretary George Berry.<sup>15</sup> The valuable McIndoe account does not give the medium's name but he is without doubt talking about Helen Duncan.



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<sup>13</sup> SNU Presidents' Page: <http://www.snu.org.uk/spiritualism/presidents>

<sup>14</sup> This was republished in paperback in 2008 by Saturday Night Press Publications and is normally available at the Arthur Findlay College shop and via Amazon.

<sup>15</sup> For details see the first issue of "Pioneer": <http://www.snu.org.uk/spiritualism/pioneer>



Below is the full account published in “The National Spiritualist”, October issue, 1929:

## A Scots Materialising Medium

Scotland has produced not a few notable mediums. Recently I was privileged to sit twice with one who gives promise of being worthy to rank with the best of them.

Mr. J. J. Darby also sat at the first seance, and his opinion as to the outstanding quality of the phenomena is similar to my own, and it is gratifying to be able to make the first published report of a sitting with this medium, in the columns of the NATIONAL SPIRITUALIST, where such matter should figure more prominently than it does.

The name of the medium is meantime withheld, she resides—somewhere North of the Tweed.



Helen Duncan in 1942

We ascended an attic stair, to an “upper room” with the ceiling so low that the writer could not stand erect. It was a hot sultry night, ventilation was *nonest* and the noise of passing traffic frequently drowned the voices from the Beyond. The medium suffered bad health for a number of years, but it has considerably improved since this phase of her phenomena began. With the cares of a house and seven children on her shoulders, there seems little opportunity for psychic development. Certainly these conditions do not seem at all conducive to psychic manifestations, especially that particularly delicate, complex, and rare type,—full form materialisation, with the materialised forms moving about in the circle talking to the sitters, in red light.

My first sitting—the 22nd at which this phase has been in evidence lasted just three—quarters of hour. It opened with prayer, a hymn, and a brief period for silent prayer, at the end of which the medium was seen to be in trance, limp in her chair, and breathing heavily. The curtains of the cabinet were then closed, the candle extinguished, and only a red lamp left burning.

It gave sufficient light for the sitters to see one another and observe what occurred, though the features of the forms would scarcely have been distinguishable when they came had they not been self luminous, with a peculiar soft radiance.

There were ten sitters, six ladies and four gentlemen, two of each of these groups were entirely new sitters at the circle, while other two of each group, including the medium’s husband were regular sitters. The small sector of a circle in which we sat in two rows, nearly filled the room. Those of us in the front row were not more than four feet from the curtains. We could easily have touched most of the forms when they came out.

There were no test conditions asked for, though the medium has been stringently tested by others. Why should we want test conditions more or less humiliating to the medium, and implying doubts as to her honesty, and inevitably reacting on her, engendering feelings of resentment.

In any case no test conditions could have increased our conviction as to the genuineness of the phenomena we witnessed. They bore the hall mark indelibly stamped on them. They simply could not be counterfeited by any means I can imagine.

The forms were distinctive, varied, lifelike and noiseless in their movements, not one of them remotely resembled the medium in build. Their voices were also distinctive and quite different from the medium's. Nothing in any way suggesting trickery of any kind was observed.

During the singing of a hymn, and very shortly after closing the curtains, a voice was heard in prayer in the cabinet, and a man's face pushed the curtains apart, remained a few moments and disappeared.

The ladies in the circle commenced singing in low tones whenever the various forms returned to the cabinet.

Soon another voice is heard calling "Mother" and a young girl emerged from the curtains, came over and spoke to one of the new lady sitters, who recognised her as her daughter. She conversed with her in a low tone, apparently giving a comforting message, and handed her mother a rose, taken from a bunch placed in the cabinet.

Then another girl form of different build took her place, coming from the other side of the cabinet, and was claimed as her sister by one of the ladies. She also brought a rose with her.

A short interval, and a child's head peeps round the edge of the curtain timorously, disappears, but returns quickly, and finally the full form comes right out, apparently somewhat frightened, at first. It looked about 21 inches in height, moved gracefully and quickly, and came close up to the lady next to me. It appeared to me to be more solid, and "finished" than most of the other forms.

I need not describe all the forms who appeared. There were eight of them, one child, two young girls and an older woman, and four men. Six of them came right out in front of the curtains, and seven of the eight spoke to us. One of the controls "Donald" had quite a conversation with us. He was a well built man. By request he brought a mandoline from the cabinet, and twanged the strings. We could easily see the hand which held it, but not the one which touched the strings. Finally he handed it to a sitter. He was asked to touch my outstretched hand. This has not previously been done. He appeared to make several attempts to do so. On the last his hand was plainly visible above mine, but he failed to touch it, and disappeared very suddenly, while the medium gave vent to a groan as if in pain. At the conclusion of the sitting there was blood on her mouth and chin, and some had trickled down on her dress. This had

occurred on previous occasions when a form suddenly vanished for some reason or other.

At the second sitting “Donald” was asked about it and explained that he had come out too far. On that occasion something did touch my hand, held close up to the curtain. It had the appearance of a stump with two fingers, and was rather hard, but the contact was too brief to allow any definite opinion to be formed.

The notable features of the second seance were that there were two children right out moving in the circle at the same time. They came one from each side of the curtains. Later on by request of a sitter two apports were brought. One was a small ornament from the room below.

The other was a small brass washer, with three scratches on it for identification. It had been placed in a drawer in a roll top desk in his own house some distance away, about six weeks earlier, by one of the regular sitters, who had frequently asked, as he did on this occasion, that it should be brought. This was the first time that it was done. The owner is absolutely certain of the identity of the washer.

An unusual feature is the signal that the phenomena is being brought to a close—an arm appears stretched out, with the hand closed. The seances close with a brief prayer by one of the materialised controls, but at my second sitting while the doxology was being sung, and the medium had become at least partially conscious, we observed that the curtains were being distended in a peculiar way. It gave the impression of an attempt to help the medium who was in a state of profuse perspiration, by producing a current of air.

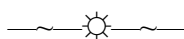
Lest the sceptic suggest that I and the other sitters were all simultaneously and similarly hallucinated, I may say that this account is compiled from notes written continuously by myself during the seances.

The medium is naturally psychic, of Highland blood. Her physical phenomena commenced with table movements, then voice phenomena, and finally the materialisation phase which has reached its present development in about six months. She also occasionally has had slate writing, and possesses remarkable psychometric gifts.

With a little more development the phenomena should be stabilised sufficiently to stand the strain of more public presentation, but it is most earnestly to be hoped that it will not be checked by too early public sittings.

J. B. McINDOE.

McIndoe’s account of his two séances is the first *detailed* independent account of Duncan’s early development in physical mediumship. Both Souter and McIndoe refer to multiple controls/guides and Duncan’s most famous control, Albert Stewart, is not mentioned by name, so it appears that in 1929 he was not yet present or not in full control.



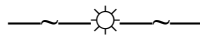
# Why did the S.N.U. remove Helen Duncan's diploma in 1945?

## Special Introduction:

The Union is sometimes asked why (70 years ago this year) it withdrew its certificate as a physical medium from Helen Duncan shortly after her release from prison. Officers of the Union had assisted Mrs Duncan in her trial and the Freedom Fund provided considerable financial help.

After her release, experienced sitters with Mrs Duncan reported that she had resumed frequent sittings and that the quality of her mediumship showed a marked decline. Attempts to help her establish a safer mode of work were rejected by her. The Union became concerned that in the event of a further arrest and trial the good name of Spiritualism would be damaged. Any medium who holds a certificate from the Union is in effect sponsored by the Union.

Recently the Executive Committee has re-examined the surviving documentation. It has given permission to Paul Gaunt, the curator of the Britten Memorial Museum and editor of the Union's own historical journal, 'The Pioneer', to publish this, so that Union members and the public can have the facts before them. We welcome any further information.



Although at the time the Union published an official statement in the 'Two Worlds', seven decades on the reasons for the Union withdrawing the diploma that Helen Duncan had held from circa 1931 are shrouded in mystery. The various biographies and websites give no information on the actual events which resulted in the removal of her diploma.

On Friday September 22nd 1944, Helen Duncan, after serving 172 days of her nine-month sentence, was released from HM Prison Holloway. As published in the 'Two Worlds' for October 20th 1944, Helen wrote from the Royal Infirmary, Edinburgh:

I am likely to be here for some time as my heart is affected . . . My Spiritualism is my life, and for all the laws of the country I could not and will not give it up. I will not sit again under the same conditions, but intend to keep my mediumship active.

There are numerous reports that Helen had broken away from the SNU shortly after her release from prison; this claim appears not to be strictly true. Helen was a friend of Percy



Wilson<sup>1</sup> and his family, who gave support to Helen at her 1944 trial. Dorothy Wilson was the Secretary of the Exponents and Education Committee<sup>2</sup> and her husband Percy was a National Councillor of the Union and also (I believe) the Chairman of the Exponents and Education Committee.

In September 1944 the National Council appointed Miss May Price as General Secretary of the Union, taking over from Ernest Allan Keeling in October. The Union had inaugurated a 'National Register' of Exponents and Mediums, using the 1944 Diploma list as a basis.<sup>3</sup> Miss Price sent out the documentation in December 1944 and as part of the Union's campaign for religious freedom Helen was asked to sign the declaration and return it with her Class B subscription for 1945.

Dorothy Wilson wrote to Helen on February 1st 1945, as the General Secretary had had no reply and the signed declaration, etc. were required by February 10th. A few days later Helen's reply was received, thanking Dorothy for her nice letter and giving her regards to Percy and the boys. Helen stated: "I did not think it worth my while signing it as I am not working. I am not in a position meantime to renew my membership fee. I did think the S.N.U. would have made me a member free meantime." She returned the signed (V. H. Duncan) declaration dated February 4th 1945.

Dorothy Wilson replied on February 7th thanking her for the declaration and commenting: "I thought you were not working at present but did not know if you intended to take up work again. With regard to your membership fee, I am afraid that the Union could not pay, but my husband and I will gladly pay it for you this year. I think you are wise to take a long rest from seance work. I hope you will soon get back to health and strength..." Wilson notes: "subs 5/- sent to office".

The following month SNU Minister and founder editor of 'Psychic News', Maurice Barbanell, received news that Helen was again working. Below is taken from 'Psychic News', March 31st 1945 – "All Worlds Are One" feature: -<sup>4</sup>

### **Warning To Helen Duncan**

Once again it falls to my lot to issue a public warning to Helen Duncan. If she had paid attention to my previous warnings, I doubt whether she would have been prosecuted.

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<sup>1</sup> SNU President 1950-1953.

<sup>2</sup> Today we have the Dorothy Wilson Prize: this is for the highest marks over a completed range of subjects required for the award of a Diploma as a Speaker, Demonstrator or Administrator.

<sup>3</sup> 1943: A New Scheme by the Exponents' Committee for a National Register approved by the National Council. Percy Wilson exhibited this to the Conference at the following AGM at Leicester (July 1944), with a printed copy of the Exponent's Certificate, which had been approved by the Exponents' Committee. During this year "Applications from platform workers for inclusion in the National Register have been coming in steadily. During 1944 365 Certificates were granted, bringing the total on the Register, including Diploma Holders, up to 514. There were no educational examinations held during 1944," as the whole Educational Course was in the process of being revised.

<sup>4</sup> Kindly supplied courtesy of Psychic News, Suite 6, Thremhall Park, Start Hill, Bishops Stortford, Hertfordshire CM22 7WE.

Soon after her release from prison, she was approached by the Spiritualists' National Union, whose freedom fund paid the entire cost of her defence, with the suggestion that the Union should take charge of her seances. Mrs. Duncan refused to agree.

She has been giving "materialisation" seances in Lancashire, and the results, as they are described to me, are very poor. Whatever they are, they are not materialisations. That does not surprise me in view of the ordeal through which she has passed. The reports are sent me by sympathetic Spiritualists who attended her seances in the old days.

### **Heading For Trouble**

I warn Helen Duncan that she is asking for trouble. To travel the country, giving seances without competent supervision by the S.N.U. or some similar body, will land her again in jail. This time the sentence is likely to be not nine months, but five years. In any case, she ought to wait till her powers return.

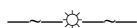
At least as a gesture to the S.N.U., which has done so much on her behalf, Mrs. Duncan ought to place herself under their auspices.

Besides, she is placing the S.N.U. in a great dilemma. She holds their diploma as a physical medium and therefore they are sponsoring her seances.

Maurice Barbanell informed the Spiritualists' National Union of concerns surrounding Helen's mediumship, giving contact details of a séance held in the Wigan area. On March 31st Dorothy Wilson wrote to the complainant regarding a séance held on March 5th. Asking for full details and a statement confirming the report if possible from some other person, Mrs Wilson stated: "It is highly important particularly at present, that everything should be done that is possible to safeguard the movement generally."

On April 2nd Dorothy Wilson received a copy of the report of the séance in question and the next day she received another report of the séance signed by the complainant, with signatures and addresses from four of the sitters at the March 5th séance. Although the report is seventy years old the personal details of all parties are not here published.

Below is the full report printed for the first time. The complainant sent what he called the 'First report', signed by four of the sitters, and in a 'Further report' he gives more information about the séance and his own personal views. The First report is inserted into the Further report as instructed by the writer.



## **Report of a seance held in Lancashire on 5th March, 1945. With Mrs. Helen Duncan as the Medium**

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The subject-matter of a tentative report forwarded to the Editor of "Psychic News" on 21st March, 1945, having received mention in the columns of that paper and resulted in a request for further details for consideration by the Exponents Committee and the Council of the Spiritualists' National Union, the following facts, comments and theories are to be read in conjunction with that report as the personal observations and statements of the undersigned, and are not to be embodied above any other signature which may be appended to the First Report, unless application is made to such other signatories for confirmation.

Experience of Spiritualism.--I have been interested in Spiritualism for more than 20 years, and in addition to clairvoyance, clairaudience and Psychometry, have had the experience of seeing levitation, Transfiguration, cold lights, slate writing, trance and other kinds of control, pictures in the crystal (whether or not this can be considered as part of Spiritualistic phenomena), hearing voices from the trumpet and direct voice, trance and inspirational addresses, and exponents of Spiritualist philosophy. In addition I have seen materialisation with Mrs. Helen Duncan dating from pre-war days and one other medium for materialisation.

I have read much Spiritualist literature, and received messages of great importance from mediums as well as a lot of messages which have never come true. At the risk of unpopularity I have always insisted upon the recipients of messages and the witnesses of phenomena keeping to the actual facts of their experience.

Events before the seance now under consideration.--The party for the seance on March 5th consisted of 14 women and three men, and apart from the householder, I was the only male present who had witnessed materialisation, though several of the ladies had attended such seances. On one occasion I saw as many as three figures walking and talking to members of the audience at a seance in Lancashire, but Mrs. Duncan was not the medium that day. However, I have seen figures materialised and walking about when Mrs. Duncan was seated in her chair, there being no doubt that the figures were entirely separate from Mrs. Duncan. I know Mrs. Duncan personally, having had long conversations with her and there is no possibility of mistaken identity in this case.

Lunch was taken at an hotel situated some half mile from the meeting place. All were in good humour, for the journey had been pleasant, the day was fine though not too warm, and the lunch was quite enjoyable. One or two of the party had a small whisky with tea or coffee, but the majority had nothing intoxicating, and approximately three hours elapsed between the end of lunch and the commencement of the seance. I must leave it to others to comment on the possibility of this liquor having a detrimental effect upon the proceedings which were to follow.

The medium was not on hand when the meeting place was reached and during the wait of almost two hours many of the party became restless and anxious. Some were fortified with tea but the sigh of relief when the arrival of the medium was announced was indicative of the strain under which most of the party had been labouring.

The medium arrived in a taxi and was unaccompanied. I thought she looked younger and fresher than when I had seen her before. Despite the advisability of a rest being urged upon her, the medium decided to carry on without delay, and the party moved into the séance room, the accommodation proving to be only just sufficient. Although testimony was given as stated in the first report (inserted below) that the cabinet had been examined it was not examined during my presence in the seance room, and as I was one of the first in the room to take my place at the farthest end, there had been opportunity after such examination to carry out any irregularities had such been intended. Mrs. Duncan did not change into seance robes as was her former custom, indeed she said she did not intend to change, but invited a search to be made of the clothes she was then wearing and retained during the séance.

I had an opportunity to look into the cabinet after the seance, and a glance revealed the presence of a cupboard or drawer behind the curtain, and this, along with the perfunctory search of the medium, came in for adverse criticism after the meeting.

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The First Report should be read here. - ↓  
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The seance was held in a cottage situated in a remote part of Lancashire. The meeting room about 12' x 15', contained furniture appropriate to the premises, while the cabinet was formed by dark draw-curtains across one corner. About 20 people were present, some of whom had had experience of materialisation. Lighting was provided by means of an electric torch and a storm lamp, both being dimmed by red material.

In answer to a question by the medium one of the sitters testified that the cabinet had been examined. The medium then left the room to be searched and, on returning, entered the cabinet immediately, sinking down into the chair with her eyes closed, whereupon the curtains were drawn. At once a voice from the cabinet asked for the light to be reduced, and the electric lamp was extinguished. The storm lamp (which was suspended from the ceiling), continued to give illumination sufficient to enable all the sitters and the contents of the room to be seen with ease and in detail.

A voice from behind the curtain described a visitor and, after being invited to come forward, a figure appeared holding the curtains apart. From the farthest end of the room the figure was plainly that of the medium draped in something white, her face, hands and dress being distinguishable.

The announcer from the cabinet spoke in a voice unlike that of the medium, and the figures which appeared had intonations in keeping with their age and sex. The voice of the announcer sounded very tired and dropped to a weary whisper at the end of each sentence. The figures were not announced by name, and the sitters concerned were found by the voice from the cabinet asking for someone near the centre, or someone near the back, and so on, and first one sitter and then another would speak up until the right one was found, signified by: "Yes, that is the voice".

The only information volunteered from the cabinet was man, woman or child, and the nature of their passing. "Came to our side of life under very tragic circumstances", "The cause of passing was due directly to child-birth", "Died from consumption", "Invite the lady out, please," "Sing a hymn". These few sentences, each repeated more than once,



comprised the conversation from the announcer, and every languid utterance trailed off--a low rallentando, with a kind of despair, which persisted even in the closing remark when the announcer "Hoped he had made everyone very happy".

The figures, when they did talk, often failed to address a single remark directly to the sitters who had claimed them, reserving their conversation for those people near to the cabinet, while the voices, dialects, expressions of speech and mannerisms sometimes proved a hindrance rather than an aid to recognition. On more than one occasion when the visitor failed to display any of the characteristics which should have served as identification, a dumfounded sitter would be further embarrassed by the visitant's remark—"Is that all you have to say?"

One of the sitters asked after her own guide--an Indian of exceptional height, and the medium appeared holding her left arm aloft, with the hand turned palm downwards over her head, whilst a quantity of white stuff draped the hand--a representation of the head of a tall man. Unlike the more averaged-sized figures, this head seemed to be featureless, the majority of the faces being well formed and of a good colour - healthy looking in the rosy light, and belonging to figure which was the medium in her black dress (really dark navy Blue), scantily draped in white stuff--often transfigured to fit the part, but still the same.

The announcer had already intimated that the power was failing when someone in the audience asked for the medium's child guide. A figure appeared and made an attempt to sing and give some semblance of gaiety, but it was a failure, and the figure withdrew.

Through the sitting the moving of feet inside the cabinet was to be heard and sometimes distinct footsteps sounded, as the figures approached the curtains or shifted position whilst in full view of all present.

The meeting was very orderly, (\*and though it was obvious to both the experienced sitters and those unacquainted with the phenomena what was taking place,) no attempt was made to interrupt the proceedings.

Signed ... & four of the sitters.

End of First report inserted.

In the last paragraph of the First Report (marked\*) the words in brackets should be deleted and read here (\*and though it was obvious to both the experienced sitters and those unacquainted with the phenomena what was taking place,) for it was only after the seance was over that it became obvious that all present knew what had been taking place, and I wished to keep the First Report free from all comment.

Being in a private house I, for one, did not wish to create any disturbance, and along with the others paid the fee (12/6), with as good a grace as possible, and the party returned to the hotel for tea.

Behind closed doors tongues became loosened, and opinions about the seance were expressed with great candour. One or two claimed to have seen the irregularities of such a nature that they were reluctant to make unsupported statements. These I must leave for further verification.

Comments and opinions by the sitters.--All who spoke up at the meeting over the teacups were emphatic that every figure was Mrs Duncan draped in white stuff. Those nearest to the cabinet confirming what I had seen from a greater distance. Only one claimed to have received anything evidential and that was in a single remark said to be characteristic of the person who was supposed to have materialised. One gentleman received a long speech upholding Roman Catholicism from his returned 'father', who claimed to be a Roman still, but as the real father was never a Roman Catholic it was not evidential.

Figures claiming to be my wife's mother and an Uncle John of mine followed one another. Neither spoke directly to us, and both would have made us blush with their coarse speech and dialect, for my wife's mother was a gently reserved woman, full of warm love for both of us, while the Uncle John referred to was an author, poet, linguist, historian, of mild speech and ready but kindly wit.

This example proved to be typical of practically all the 'visitors' as the following comments will show.

- (1). The whole show was a hoax.
- (2). Mrs. Duncan brought the white stuff into the room.
- (3). The white stuff was hidden in the drawer or cupboard in the cabinet.
- (4). Mrs. Duncan was conscious all the time and faked the trance.
- (5). Mrs. Duncan is a ventriloquist.
- (6). Mrs. Duncan is a transfiguration medium.
- (7). The white stuff was muslin or some such material.  
Etc. Etc.

As such remarks as these were passed by sitters who had previously been convinced of the genuineness of Mrs. Duncan's powers as a materialisation medium, the Portsmouth affair takes on another aspect if it was a séance of similar quality.

Each of the above comments presents its own difficulties, and, as I do not accuse the medium of any one of the above suggested 'frauds', I will pass on to my own speculations as to the why and wherefore of the matter, but must first mention further comments made: -

- (8). The white stuff was apported material.
- (9). Conditions were poor and an attempt was being made to please the sitters.

Personal opinion.--of the above (1) Too crude. (2) Foolish to bring insufficient. (3) As No. 2. (4) No evidence that Mrs. Duncan is so cunning or so clever. (5) No evidence—would do well on the stage. (6) Possible, but useless without other factors already dismissed in (2). (7) Again, why bring an insufficiency. The medium was never fully draped. (8) Why poor show at materialisation when gifted as apport medium? (9) A poor excuse for all the sitters were displeased.

Those in a position to know stated that the medium smelled of whiskey. I do know that this applied on former occasions. I also know that the medium is sometimes draped when genuine phenomena also takes place at the same seance.

My problems are somewhat different. The lighting was greater than I have ever seen before. The voice of Albert, allowing for the tired tone described was, in my opinion, the same tone and manner of expression as formerly. If Albert was in charge why should he allow such a travesty? The attempt at vivacity was very like the former Peggy, as was the voice.

I therefore conclude that Mrs. Duncan was unconscious of the proceedings, and under the influence of a subconscious power with the clairvoyance of the hypnotic state, with ectoplasm present as the automatic result of training by external powers, i.e., Albert and his assistants, the insufficiency of ectoplasm being due to the power required to move the medium physically.

I may be completely wrong, and would appreciate any further suggestions or findings of the Exponents Committee or Council.

(Signed).....

The complainant added another five points to his report:

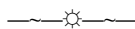
(1) The seance lasted somewhat under half an hour.

(2) The sound of footsteps referred to were slippers or booted feet.

(3) During the seance the remark “Don’t do that!” was made inside the cabinet as though one person was remonstrating with another. The voice was not Mrs. Duncan’s normal voice.

(4) About two-thirds way through the seance a request was made from the cabinet for the light to be lowered and a gentleman turned the storm lamp lower, but there remained sufficient light to see clearly all that was taking place. The storm lamp, though covered round the side allowed a considerable amount of white light to escape, throwing a ring of clear light onto the ceiling.

(5) One sitter near the cabinet declared that when a child’s figure was presented the medium was definitely stooping down, her back, in a horizontal position being clearly visible. I did not see his myself.



On April 13th 1945 a typewritten letter signed by May Price, the General Secretary of the Union, was sent to Helen Duncan outlining the complaints against her:

Dear Mrs Duncan,

The Council of the Union has received reports that you have recently held a number of seances in North Wales and in Lancashire in circumstances which might have brought grave consequences to yourself and to the Spiritualist Movement as a whole.

One report, signed by a number of the sitters who were present, contains details of a seance which you attended unaccompanied at a certain village in Lancashire. It is stated:

(1) that at this seance a number of supposed materialised forms appeared but that the particulars of identity given by these forms and by the voice from the cabinet – ostensibly that of ‘Albert’ but very tired and dropping to a weary whisper at the end of each sentence – were fictitious and in no wise evidential:

(2) that all these supposed materialised forms were plainly yourself in your dark dress, scantily draped in white stuff; your face and hands and dress being distinguishable from the farthest end of the room;

(3) that throughout the sitting the moving of feet inside the cabinet was heard and sometimes distinct footsteps (as of booted feet) sounded as the figure approached the curtains or shifted position whilst in view;

(4) that some sitters identified the form of a small figure as yourself bending to a horizontal position and partly draped in white.

The council also understand that some of the sitters allege;

(a) that when you arrived at the cottage your breath smelled of whiskey.

(b) that before the seance neither you nor the cabinet was searched in the presence of witnesses;

(c) that the white material was introduced by yourself.

(d) that the whole sitting was a hoax.

Other sitters, whilst not accusing you of conscious fraud or deliberate attempts to deceive, nevertheless regard the seance as entirely, and even dangerously, unsatisfactory and indicative of a very serious deterioration in your mediumship.

The Council has learned of these reports with great regret since the holding of seances of the kind, and in the conditions of these to which the reports relate, cannot but be regarded as “likely to discredit the cause of Spiritualism” (see Regulation 5 enclosed).

In view of the warnings already given to you, privately by the Union’s legal advisor after your discharge from Holloway gaol and publicly in the Declaration of the Freedom Committee, the Council has been obliged to consider the question of the continuance of your Diploma. In this connection, it is prepared to take into account any representation

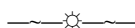


you may wish to make provided these are sent to me within the next 28 days. For the present, however, having regard to the serious position created by your conduct, the Council must ask you to regard your Diploma as being suspended.

Yours sincerely,

p.p SPIRITUALISTS' NATION UNION LTD.,

General Secretary.



A handwritten reply was received from Mrs Duncan on April 18th 1945 as shown below:

Dear Miss Price,

I have received your letter with the same post I received the enclosed from Wigan.<sup>5</sup> I do think in all fairness to me they might have complained at the time and have given me a chance to defend myself anyway I have not been giving sitting, only there it is the first & last I can assure you. I have come to the conclusion it is kick a dog when it is down. I feel very indignant about the past smelt drink what a dam cheek & I can get those who were in contact with me to prove otherwise. I have never touched any drink in no way since before I was at Portsmouth & I resent it very much. Anyway I am having nothing more to do with the movement so that is final & for Mr. Quastel of Meersbrook he has a very short lived memory he had plenty of me & now he talks about something he knows nothing about.<sup>6</sup>

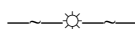
I am yours faithfully,

V. H. Duncan

P.S.

Oh & by the way who in the S.N.U. offered me any work. I have always worked for S.N.U. churches & for Portsmouth it was a district councillor who took me there first & the one who said I said I would not work for them for £20 is a liar.

Please don't trouble to reply.



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<sup>5</sup> "Wigan, Lancs. Dear Mrs. Duncan, I have read with deep regret the account in the "Psychic News" & I am writing to tell you that the people of Wigan know nothing at all about it. I was dumb founded when Ella came back from Blackpool & told me that they wondered if it was from here, on my oath it was not, for although you have disappointed me so many times & I have been put to a lot of trouble it would be the last thing in my head to do you a dirty trick. We are still expecting you. Sincerely, (signed).. .."

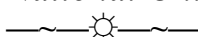
<sup>6</sup> **Warning To Helen Duncan:** "I AGREE absolutely that if Helen Duncan does not toe the line and stop giving seances until her mediumship is A1 again, and until she agrees to let the S.N.U. "mother" her the S.N.U. should *not* defend her if she gets into trouble again.

"If mediums realise that S.N.U. money will only be spent when *justified* by circumstances, they will work much more wisely.—C. I. Quastel. Sheffield."

Taken from *Psychic News*, 14th April 1945, 'Dear Sir' (letters) feature. Kindly supplied courtesy of *Psychic News*.

Around this time Maurice Barbanell furnished the Union with some more reports, which showed that at around the time of the above-reported séance Duncan had conducted at least six others, some in North Wales, some at Blackpool, and others in the Wyre district of Lancashire. Barbanell was informed on April 22nd 1945 that the matter had been taken up with Mrs Duncan but there was no decision as yet on the course of action against her. There appears to be only one surviving report from the Wyre district of Lancashire dated April 3rd 1945; it states that Duncan gave two séances on the same day, March 5th, and it is reported: “Mrs. Duncan was drunk and the phenomena very unsatisfactory, every entity smelling of whisky.” There were nineteen people present at the afternoon séance. A further séance was arranged for the next day, Tuesday March 6th, but Duncan never arrived, as she was in Blackpool and gave two séances.

*The combination of these reports resulted in the removal of Helen Duncan's Spiritualists' National Union diploma.*<sup>7</sup>



### **What can be concluded from these reports?**

It is clear these allegations were of a serious nature for the Spiritualist movement as a whole, especially to the SNU, as Helen Duncan was one of their diploma-holders, in essence representing the Union. We can note that Maurice Barbanell did not make these allegations headline news in ‘Psychic News’ but passed the main bulk of the complaint to the Union to deal with. At this time the Union’s ‘Freedom Committee’ were very active on the Parliamentary pre-election pledges made by candidates that they would, if elected, help change the law on mediumship, and in February of this year Hannen Swaffer had addressed a meeting at the House of Commons. Helen had been released from Holloway prison for less than six months, so another full-scale criminal investigation would have had a devastating effect on the movement and would put the Union in poor light.

As already noted by Barbanell, Helen would not work fully under the auspices of the Union and in the past she had ignored the advice of experienced Spiritualists like John McIndoe and Maurice Barbanell about over-sitting. It may appear that this is one of the major problems in these allegations. No doubt Helen’s response to the claims put against her did little for the SNU Council<sup>8</sup> and the Exponents and Education Committee to reach a more favourable decision regarding the removal of her diploma. It is presently unclear whether the Union made further investigations into these claims, which I believe to be doubtful, as Helen makes no other defence than her letter. We should recall also the long efforts of the ‘Parliamentary and Freedom Fund’; it is reported that the Duncan trial cost the Fund, originally started in 1916, around £3,000 (I have not confirmed this figure). As the efforts to gain freedom from the Vagrancy Act and the Witchcraft Act were now more realistic with a change of government, it may have been felt, given the limited response of Helen to the allegations, that the Union had no option other than to withdraw her certificate!

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<sup>7</sup> All the documentation (unless otherwise stated) is held in the Britten Memorial Museum at the Arthur Findlay College, Stansted Hall, Essex.

<sup>8</sup> Harold Vigurs, President; Mr A. Raffill, Vice-President; John McIndoe, Treasurer.

## But what if the allegations had been more fully investigated?

### For example:

The Union's complaint no. 5 stated that "when you arrived at the cottage your breath smelled of whisky." The Wyre district of Lancashire report stated: "Mrs. Duncan was drunk..."

Helen's response was:

"I feel very indignant about the past smelt drink what a dam cheek & I can get those who were in contact with me to prove otherwise. I have never touched any drink in no way since before I was at Portsmouth & I resent it very much."

I am not sure how one can distinguish the different types of alcohol consumed from a person's breath and state it is whisky rather than, say, rum. In June 2015, during an exchange of information with one of Helen's granddaughters, Maggie Hahn, Maggie mentioned to me: "My sister knows how I feel about my gran and she sent me her **address book and it had the letter, a medical statement about grandma emitting the smell of alcohol because of her diabetes.**" On further investigation it appears that diabetics can display symptoms similar to drunkenness and have a smell of alcohol on their breath.

### The Séance:

Given the complex structure of physical mediumship and the physical depletion it causes in the medium's body with the extraction of ectoplasm, or, as Duncan's control, Albert, calls it, 'psychoplasm', over-exertion reduces the necessary energy required in the production of a successful séance, especially where full-form materialisation is demonstrated, as in the case of Helen Duncan. If we consider the séance which is at the centre of the complaint, neither the sitters nor the medium sat in what may be considered *conducive* and *harmonious* conditions to achieve the best possible results; it appears that that significant fact may have been overlooked!

The séance party of seventeen persons had been out to lunch and one or two had drunk alcohol. When they reached the séance location the medium had not arrived; in fact she was almost two hours late! The sitters "became restless and anxious". Helen arrived by taxi, unaccompanied; she was urged to rest but the medium "decided to carry on without delay". All moved into the séance room. The first report states that the "cabinet had been examined" (curtains across the corner of the room). The medium did not change into her séance clothes, generally part of her pre-séance procedure. The medium invited a search of her clothes she was wearing again; generally she was stripped and searched (the two reports are slightly conflicting).

Generally speaking, Duncan's séances were fairly well-lit and the séance procedure was quite consistent throughout her years of work. The séance in question is not typical. Duncan's control would announce himself as Albert, ask Mrs Duncan (how he addressed her) to stand up, then he would show himself and his medium together, a prayer would be said and a singing of a hymn. None of this is mentioned in the reports.

The first report, signed by four of the sitters, shows the phenomena were very weak and unsatisfactory. The actual séance is reported to be less than thirty minutes in duration! Given the above problems the circumstances were not *conducive* and *harmonious*.

Despite warnings already mentioned by McIndoe and Barbanell for over-sitting Helen would still conduct two séances in a day; in fact, on the two occasions she was arrested, in Edinburgh in 1933 and Portsmouth in 1944, this was the case! We can note that Helen actually conducted three séances on March 5th! She gave two séances in the Wyre district, possibly one in the morning, followed by an afternoon séance, when nineteen people were present. This goes a long way to answering why Helen was so late and rushed when she attended the Wigan area. It is possible that this séance was her second again, hence the rush and short séance to return to the first venue for an evening séance. The actual séance times are not recorded. The distance between the two locations is forty-two miles! Given that she had three séances booked the following day but only attended two, this helps explain the poor results of the séances, which can only be looked upon as reckless and justifies the concerns about her conduct towards the movement and the SNU.

Did Helen resort to fraud or, given her drained physical constitution, did she become subjected to a subconscious influence, as concluded by the writer of the report? Do mediums consciously premeditate fraud or do low, mischievous spirits carry out the fraud unconsciously? Some will argue that the medium premeditated the fraud and is therefore conscious and responsible for their actions, whilst others would say that owing to the influence of low, mischievous spirits or of the sitters in the séance the medium is totally unaware of their actions, as they are in a somnambulistic state and therefore cannot be accountable for their *unconscious* actions. For example, in August 1877 Catherine (Kate) Elizabeth Wood (1854-1884) was headlined “Miss Wood Caught Personating a Spirit”. The report stated: “During the unconscious state the medium is made the victim of the circumstances by which she is surrounded, and either through the perverted action of some of her own controls, or the intrusion of other spirits, she is reduced to the disgraceful position in which she was found.”

However, whatever conclusion is reached by the reader, not all the accusations levied against her are fair or correct.

For example:

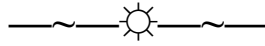
SNU complaint no. 4 (b): “that before the séance neither you nor the cabinet was searched in the presence of witnesses.” This is not strictly true.

Sitters suggest fraud: Duncan brought the “white stuff” into the room – the “white stuff” was hidden in the drawer or cupboard in the cabinet – the “white stuff” was muslin or such.

It was the sitters who searched the medium, as signed by five sitters (including the writer of the report): “...medium then left the room to be searched and, on returning, entered the cabinet...” It is very strange to consider that a cabinet (curtains across a corner of the room) would in fact have these convenient hiding-places: how would Helen know this in advance or did she enter the cabinet before the start of the séance? There is no evidence to support this; as Mrs Duncan stated in her letter: “I do think in all fairness to me they might have complained at the time and have given me a chance to defend myself anyway.”

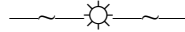
The list of the allegations could be further discussed but what degree of fraud was involved, if any, will remain speculative, given the passing of seven decades. If Helen Duncan had stood her ground, giving further explanations, and had invited investigations to be carried out by the SNU, the outcome would have, at the very least, been more balanced and definitive. The greater concern in the removal of her diploma may have been her recklessness, having

little regard to the management of her own mediumship, as is evident in the reports and comments. Helen's mediumship never regained the quality and support of her pre-trial days.



# HELEN DUNCAN SÉANCE DURING HER 1944 TRIAL

*New séance evidence!*



In 1958 a conference was organised by the College of Psychic Science in Brighton on November 28th-30th on “The Problem of Survival”; the principal speakers were Brigadier R.C. Firebrace, Percy Wilson and Professor H.H. Price. A report of part of the discussion can be read in *Psypioneer*, Vol. 5, No. 1, January 2009.

Percy Wilson and his family were friends with Helen Duncan and during his 1958 lecture he wanted to put on record the circumstances relating to the Duncan prosecution. Below is a short quote relating to a séance during the trial at Wilson’s house; as a result of this séance he considered “...that evidence was sufficient for us to conclude that it was safe, even in the hard circumstances of the court at the Old Bailey, for Mr. Loseby to offer the judge and jury a personal demonstration when he opened his evidence for the defence. That offer, as you will remember, was refused.”



Further information of the Duncan trial can be found in the “Pioneer”, Vol. 2, No. 4, July 2015: “The Effect of the Vagrancy Act (Part III) – The Work of the Spiritualists’ National Union” – Helen Duncan in Court – Was Helen Removed by the British Intelligence Services? – Eighth Day – Monday 3rd April 1944 – Sentences

## EVIDENCE FOR SURVIVAL

### The Historical Significance of Physical Mediumship

By Percy Wilson, M.A.

#### Séance During Trial

During the trial one of my sons, Geoffrey, acted in the court as a messenger for the defence, and when it was half-way through, after prosecution evidence had been given, we arranged (it was a Friday afternoon) that he should collect Mrs. Duncan straight from the court at four o'clock, take her to Holborn Viaduct station, bring her through to Wimbledon and then by taxi on to my house. This he duly did. She had had no opportunity of going anywhere else from the court on the way. And I had my usual home circle gathered there. So, we gave Mrs. Duncan a good tea, I don't advocate this before a physical circle, but there was a reason for it on this occasion because we included some really good red jam in it, thanks to the regurgitation theory of Harry Price. Shortly afterwards, we went upstairs to my own seance room and held a seance. I was seated next to the curtains of the cabinet, and there was a red light behind me on the ceiling. (I could not see it but it was shining behind me, so that my eyes were not inhibited by it.) In the course of the seance Mrs. Duncan stood up and ectoplasm poured in streams, in ribbons, from her nose and her mouth, on to her massive bosom, curled up in a ribbon on her bosom, and dropped to the ground; and then, as she was standing with her arms akimbo, I suddenly saw it leap up two ways to her hands. I was within a yard of her with a light above my head and I saw everything that happened. Shortly afterwards the whole mass of ectoplasm disappeared in an instant. I could not tell you when: it was there and then it was not. It just disappeared.

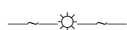
The prosecution (John Maude, KC, and Henry Elam) concluded on the second day of the trial, Friday March 24th 1944, the day the above séance was held at the Wilsons' home at 3 Sheridan Road, S.W.19. It can be noted below that in fact there was a second séance at the Wilsons' house on Monday March 27th 1944, the third day of the trial, the day Charles Loseby and J. Simpson Pedler began their defence. The sitters named are Mr and Mrs John McIndoe (former SNU President), Joseph Newton, Mrs Lyon, Percy Wilson's sons, Laurie and Geoffrey, and a nurse. It may appear the nurse was the daughter of one of Duncan's co-defendants, Christine Homer, whom McIndoe refers to below as a court witness on March 28th.

This new valuable document was given to the Britten Memorial Museum & Library by Linda Smith, President of Norwich Spiritualist Church;<sup>6</sup> Linda is the mother of Tanya Smith, the General Manager of the Arthur Findlay College. The typed séance report was found in David Dutton's old papers; David was born circa 1917 and first took to the Spiritualist platform in 1941 at Croydon Church (where he lived for some years), becoming a well-known and respected orator. He became well acquainted with the Wilson family with his involvement in "Psychic Press Ltd"; Percy Wilson was the Chairman from 1956 to his passing in 1977. "Psychic Press Ltd" published "Psychic News", ran a bookshop and published books, including Arthur Findlay books. "Psychic Press Ltd" was formed to finance the newly-formed "Psychic News" in 1932 by Maurice Barbanell and Jack M. Rubens, who received shares for the part they played; Findlay put up the necessary money

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<sup>6</sup> Norwich Spiritualist Church, affiliated to the Spiritualists' National Union:  
<http://www.norwichspiritualistchurch.org.uk/html/pictures.html>

and so controlled the company. In 1965 the charity, "The Spiritual Truth Foundation", was founded; David Dutton was the Chairman, the trustees included Laurence Wilson and Maurice Barbanell, and the Foundation is still going today.



## **NOTES MADE AT SEANCE HELD WITH MRS. HELEN DUNCAN AT 3 SHERIDAN ROAD, S.W.19. ON 27TH MARCH 1944**

Albert:<sup>7</sup> It's difficult for me to get the amount of power I would like to get. I have got a person here who I am going to try and build. It's for the gentleman towards the back (Joseph Newton). It is a gentleman who passed with abdominal trouble – kidney. Neither old nor young. George.

(A form appeared but dropped down very quickly)

Albert: Did you notice his moustache? (Mrs. Lyon – the sitter nearest the cabinet – "I caught a glimpse of it") George is not his name.

(The form again appeared at full height but, unable to retain the power, soon dropped to the floor again)

Albert: The next form is for the lady in the corner (Mrs. Lyon). Go out, sir, do not stand in here.

(Tall figure appeared, bowing his head and turning it from side to side slightly.)

Albert: Did you notice he wore a turban of some kind? (Mrs. Lyon: "Yes and he had a small beard and moustache") I have now got a child here. (Mrs. Lyon: "Please come out; I know who you are") It is a coloured child.

(Small form appears but quickly sank down. Then a bunch of ectoplasm on the floor came out of the cabinet reaching forward until it reached a point almost level with Mr. McIndoe, sitting two places from the cabinet)

Albert: They are not holding.

(White bunch on the floor again – rose up high as though trying to build a form, curtains closed and then opened again but the form sank to the floor).

Albert to Mr. McIndoe: What on earth possessed you to pick this day? (McIndoe: "Because one or two witnesses are going in tomorrow and we don't want the other side to say they only saw Mrs. Duncan seven or eight years ago")

(Curtains opened. Large white expanse of ectoplasm shown which covered the medium, Albert to medium: Stand up. Then ectoplasm was seen coming from the region of the medium's mouth in a thick fold which went down to the floor and up again towards the edge of the cabinet.

After ectoplasm had disappeared, Albert walked Mrs. Duncan right out of the cabinet. (Mrs. McIndoe: There's nothing to be seen in the cabinet")

When Mrs. Duncan was back in cabinet and curtains closed Mrs. McIndoe said "Somebody is pulling at my chair")

Albert: I am going to show it is quite a solid material. (Big knock heard). May I ask a favour of one of you young men. (Laurie Wilson). I want you to stand up and then I

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<sup>7</sup> Albert was the main control of Helen Duncan for around twenty-five years.



am going to ask you to put your foot on a rod that will come out, to prove to you that no cloth could do what this is going to do.

(Laurie stood up and moved forward from his chair about four feet. He was then about four feet from the cabinet. He put his right foot on the white rod which had come out in front of him. Suddenly he staggered backwards. The rod had pushed upwards, nearly throwing him off his balance. After the seance he said the rod had been about 9" above the floor and when he put his foot on it he pressed it down an inch or two. When it pushed up under his shoe it forced his foot up to about the height of his thigh which threw him back off his balance. The rod continued to move upwards and disappeared over the top of the curtain. Of its nature he said afterwards that it felt like cylindrical tube of perhaps 4" or 5" diameter with a hard core of 2" or 3" and soft covering.

During séance Laurie described it in these words "It felt soft and spongy as would a thin steel rod, thickly bound round with cotton wool". Albert: Would not you say it was like rubber?" Laurie: Perhaps like sorbo rubber.)

Albert: I am going away now but I know that I had to produce something and I had a reason for doing that. Mrs. Duncan sat in that court all day today and was escorted here by an outsider. (Geoffrey Wilson). You did not let her out of your sight did you young man? (Geoffrey: "No") You are quite sure she was not swallowing something. ("Yes"). There is my reason that I did that. I did not want to let Mr. McIndoe down and I have not done so. I want to say "God be with you till we meet again". And by the way, Nurse, I still adhere to my prophecy. That is all and I will now say Au revoir.

(Mrs. Duncan in a very few seconds came out of the cabinet, still partly under control. Lights raised. Mrs. Duncan's eyes were open but had a staring expression)



Reference to a strong "steel" rod can be noted on another occasion almost two decades earlier, involving the original small Duncan circle, which would be around 1926, prior to the introduction of Albert. Then under the direction of Dr. Williams, he is the least-known control but it appears he was the first in laying the foundations of the home development circle at the Duncan residence, introducing the direct voice. The quote below is taken from "The Two Worlds of Helen Duncan", by Helen's daughter, Gena Brealey, and Kay Hunter, published in 1985 (reprinted in 2008), page 52:

As he spoke [Dr Williams], out through the curtain surrounding the corner of the room which served as Helen's cabinet, came a substance not unlike cheesecloth or butter muslin. The material continued to flow until there seemed to the sitters to be at least ten yards in a soft pile in the room. Henry [Helen's husband] asked if he could touch it and was told he could. He said afterwards that it was dry and soft to touch. The other sitters remarked that there was no odour. Through the opening of the curtains they could see Helen sitting in her hard-backed chair, and the ectoplasm flowing from her nose and ears. They were amazed to see the substance flowing down the front of her dress on to her lap, then down on to the floor and out to the centre of the room. The curtains were drawn together, then the substance started to recede until the entire volume had gone back into the cabinet.

There now appeared a rod about three feet long. It came all round the sitters and stopped at Jim Murray. Dr. Williams told him to take hold of the rod and bang it on the floor. When he had done this, he was asked if the rod felt solid.

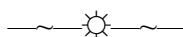
"Solid as steel," he replied.

He was then told to place the rod so that it rested on two chairs two feet apart, and to sit in the centre of the rod. He did as directed and was lifted up above the heads of the other sitters, who were asked to stand up and check that there was no rope or anything else holding Jim up.

The sitters were very careful in their examination of any spirit phenomena. Joe Souter and Frank Murray stood on chairs to make sure nothing was holding Jim from above. The voice asked if they were certain there was nothing holding Jim up so high, “no material substance”, as Dr. Williams called it. He then thanked them, and told Jim he would be lowered, and would they please watch carefully.

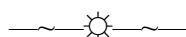
Jim was lowered gently to the floor, the rod disappeared, and Jim was left standing in the middle of the circle. Dr. Williams’ voice then said, “I will leave you for the present. Good-night, and God bless you all.”

During this stage of development much phenomena was witnessed—voices, lights, and the continuing development of the ectoplasm, which at times resembled a spider’s web, and at other times solid steel.



*Helen and her husband, Henry Duncan*

# MADAME VICTORIA DUNCAN



Helen Duncan needs little introduction as a materialisation medium. Without doubt the best resource of researched original material on Helen Duncan is the free online journal, “Psypioneer”, edited by Leslie Price; details are on the index page. We have noted in the “Pioneer” that Helen Duncan occasionally took Spiritualist meetings, with a trance address given through Helen by her main control, Albert Stewart; please see Vol. 1, No. 5, October 2014, “Builders of Bridges”.

However, it is little known that Duncan wrote about her experiences in her own weekly column, “My Second-Sight Secrets”, published in “The People’s Journal” of Dundee in 1933. In part what we would commonly refer to today as an “agony aunt”, Duncan referred to herself as a “counsellor and friend” in psychic matters; she would also work in a role as “Psychic Detective”, revealing some of the “Disappearance Cases I Have Solved”.



Below is published one of her cases in psychic detection published in “The People’s Journal”, Saturday November 11th 1933, page 24:

MANY people have consulted me, often as a last resort, in their anxiety to trace relatives who have disappeared. I have been remarkable successful in solving mysteries of this kind.

A young Glasgow woman visited me, expecting that I would provide her with confirmation of her husband’s death by drowning. On the contrary, I was able to tell her that he was alive and well, but I had to add that he had become involved in trouble which was to lead to police action.

This young woman was accompanied by a lady friend. She told me she had called regarding her husband, who was missing, and who, she had good reason to believe, had committed suicide by drowning.

“He was acting queerly for some time prior to his disappearance,” the young woman told me, and I feel sure he won’t come back.”

“You have already taken clairvoyant advice in regard to this matter,” I said to her, and she agreed.

“And you were told your husband was dead; that he had been drowned in a quarry hole.”

“Yes, out at G—.” She mentioned the name of the disused quarry on the outskirts of Glasgow.

“Then, why come to me?” I asked.

### **Motive for Leaving Home.**

The young woman hung her head, but suddenly she raised it and said, “Oh, two heads are better than one, aren’t they?”

“The head has nothing whatever to do with clairvoyance,” I replied. “The messages I received do not come from my brain in the ordinary sense of the word. I do not think back or think forward. I see.”

Observing that my client was becoming flustered, I hastened to add, “But don’t let us worry about these things. I shall help you to the best of my ability. Have you brought any article belonging to your husband with you?”

“Yes,” she said, with relief in her voice, “I’ve brought a linen collar; the collar he took off just before he went away. Will that do?”

“Splendidly,” I replied.

As soon as I received the collar into my hands I sensed that the man who had worn it was still alive, and I told my client so, adding, “I do not like to say that I am right and that someone else is wrong, but I certainly must tell you that your husband is alive. He had a motive for leaving home,” I proceeded, but the young woman interrupted me saying, “Oh, no, we were perfectly happy, Mrs Duncan.”

“This has nothing to do with his home life or his domestic happiness,” I explained. “He had a motive for going away. Wait a minute. I’m getting it. Didn’t he act as a treasurer for an employees’ holiday fund?”

My client nodded.

“There was a sum of about £50 in the fund?”

“I cannot tell you the exact amount,” she said.

“He had spent some of the money and taken the remainder with him.”

“I know he was treasurer of the fund, and that the money was yet to be paid out, but I don’t think he has been spending any of it.”

“Well,” I said, “I wish to assure you that your husband is not dead. He is living at—” (I mentioned the name of a village on the outskirts of the city.) “He is afraid to communicate with you just now in case he should provide the police with a clue to his whereabouts. You have had a visit from the police, haven’t you?” My client nodded.

“And they asked you if you had been in touch with your husband, and you truthfully replied that you had neither seen him nor heard of or from him since he went away.”

“That is so,” she replied.

“Your husband has a sister who lives not very far from where you stay, but you have not called on her.”

“No, we are not on speaking terms.”

“In a few days your sister-in-law will call on you to say she has had a communication from your husband.”

“Well, I think if he is going to write to anyone it will be to me.”

### **Arrested By Detectives.**

“Your house is being watched by the police, and he will not write to you. Your husband will return home, but—and I do not like to tell you this—he will almost immediately be taken into custody on a charge of appropriating the holiday fund to his own use.”

“If only he comes back,” she replied with emotion, “everything will be all right. We will make up the money somehow.”

“That is an honourable thought,” I said, “but I regret to say you will find it impossible to make good the loss of £50. You will try hard nevertheless. He will go before the Court and be found guilty and sentenced to a short term of imprisonment. But do not grieve too much over it. This will be a lesson your husband will never forget, and, so far as I can see at the moment, your troubles will be over.”

A fortnight or so later my client’s companion appeared at my consulting room.

“Did you see it in the paper?” she asked me.

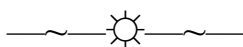
“See what?”

“About the sentence on—,” she explained.

I then recollected the visit of her friend and what I had predicted in regard to her husband, but had to confess that the court case had escaped my notice.

“It all came out as you said,” my visitor stated. “The exact amount of the money missing was £50 18s. He wrote to his sister and she went over to his wife with another letter he had enclosed for her. In this letter he said he was returning home that night. Detectives were watching for him, and when he returned about midnight they followed him upstairs and arrested him just after he had entered the house.”

*Some more examples of Helen Duncan’s psychometry (a psychic way of seeing through touching the object) and clairvoyant consultations in the next issue.*





# MADAME VICTORIA DUNCAN

It was noted in the previous issue that it is little known that Helen Duncan wrote about her experiences in her own weekly column, “My Second-Sight Secrets”, published in “The People’s Journal” of Dundee in 1933. Duncan referred to herself as a “counsellor and friend” in psychic matters; she would also work in a role as “psychic detective”, revealing some of the “Disappearance Cases I Have Solved”. In the last issue one of her cases in psychic detection was published; I noted at the end of the article that there would be some more examples of Helen Duncan’s psychometry (a psychic way of seeing through touching the object) and clairvoyant consultations in the next issue.

However, I found a more valuable article in “The People’s Journal”, November 18th 1933. The early development of Helen’s physical mediumship is somewhat contradictory in the various biographies about her development; these were looked at in *Psypioneer*, Vol. 11, No. 2, February 2015, “Helen Duncan: Early reports of her mediumship”. The article below gives a first-hand account of her trance mediumship and her control of two years, Matthew Douglas, and the introduction of Albert Stewart.

In the “Two Worlds”, September 30th 1932, James Leigh interviewed the alleged materialised form of Albert, republished in *Psypioneer*, Vol. 6, No. 2, February 2010. Albert refers to “Matthew Douglas” as “Marklew Douglas”:

“When were you first brought into contact with the medium, and what attracted you?” was the first question submitted him. His voice, coming from the head of the form—personally, I was unable to distinguish the features—was both clear and pronounced.

“It is a most difficult question to answer briefly,” he said. “When I had resided on this side a number of years, I was approached by a person interested in establishing communication with earth, and I was asked whether I would like to participate in a series of experiments. The man who addressed me was called Marklew Douglas. ‘You seem to be very clever in making things,’ he said. ‘Probably you would be useful,’ I was shown the process of building materialised spirit forms so that they become visible to people in the material world. Douglas suggested that I might possibly have the gift of moulding the



Artist’s impression of Albert Stewart

substance—which I call psychoplasm—into recognisable forms, and at his invitation I consented to conduct some experiments.

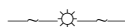
“I made many attempts, with varying success. Sometimes I was more successful than at others, but I persevered with the work. Later I discovered that I was not to make the semblance of a human form at all. I had only to clothe the thoughts of the people who presented themselves for materialisation. My task was simply to clothe the thought-form with psychoplasm so that it should become, for a short period, tangible and visible and ‘real’ to your senses.

“It was this work which brought me into contact with Mrs. Duncan. For her I have the highest regard; and I am grateful to the Higher Powers that this channel has been opened out to me, so that I can occasionally render strength and comfort to those who suffer the temporary loss of loved companions.”

It can be noted that what is generally referred to as “ectoplasm” in the quote above is called “psychoplasm” (on other occasions Albert also used the term “the substance”). When Helen was tested in the early 1930s at the London Psychical Laboratory, the research department of the London Spiritualist Alliance (today the College for Psychic Studies), the researchers called it “teleplasm”.<sup>9</sup>

J. Arthur Findlay in his book “The Torch of Knowledge”, referenced in the previous issue of Pioneer, stated, page 95:

*We call it ectoplasm and our friends on the other side mix it with what they call psychoplasm, a composition of their own, and the finished product they call teleplasm. As teleplasm it can be seen and felt, and it is by means of this teleplasm that they manifest their presence to us earth people.*



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<sup>9</sup> See Psypioneer, Vol. 9, No. 3, March 2013: “Spirits of the Trade: Teleplasm, Ectoplasm, Psychoplasm, Ideoplasm – Marc Demarest”.

# My First Experiences in Trances

By Madame Victoria Duncan

I HAVE already told you my experiences at materialisation seances after I had begun serious investigation of spiritualism. This week I propose to tell you of incidents that occurred at trumpet seances, which was the next stage in my progress as a spiritualist.

It was from the “other side” that the circle to which I acted as medium was advised to secure and utilise a trumpet. The reason given was that by means of a trumpet the spirit intelligence would be able to communicate more evidence.

Its use, we were informed, would enable the spirits to conserve their energy and thus ensure communications from a great number of persons who had passed on. It was added that the new method would involve less strain on the medium.

Having been instructed to exclude all white light, we began our first “trumpet séance” in utter darkness, but so that any movement of the trumpet would be visible we had the top and bottom of it painted with luminous paint. The trumpet, by the way, was in two sections, which fitted telescopically.

## Trumpet’s Peculiar Movements.

We had not long to wait for the first movement of the trumpet. I confess I was somewhat startled when it rose at a great speed from the floor.

After a momentary pause it moved in a circle with amazing rapidity. In its progress it seemed to graze the head of each sitter. Next it soared close to the ceiling, where it remained stationary for a few moments before descending as quickly as it had risen.

As soon as the trumpet came to rest invisible hands removed flowers from their vases and gently touched the heads of several of the sitters.

Voices were heard. They sounded as if they came over a telephone wire, not as if the speakers were in the room.

At the outset a strange sort of buzz came from the mouth of the trumpet, but this cleared to a certain extent, and the words became fairly distinct and intelligible.

The first voice we heard claimed to be [that of?] the controlling intelligence. He gave [the?] name of Matthew Douglas and stated he was a native of Kirkcaldy. That a gentleman of that name did at one time live in Kirkcaldy we were able to confirm at a later date. He urged us to continue our trumpet sittings and promised some wonderful manifestations if we did so.

For some time afterwards we sat regularly twice a week, and, at Matthew Douglas’s suggestion, we widened the circle by bringing in more friends.

## A Joyful Answer.

Just before one of the seances my youngest boy contracted measles. It was a serious attack and he was really very ill. In the circumstances I decided we must abandon the seance, but I found it impossible to get in touch with all the people who had been invited to attend. I sent word to as many as I could and decided I would crave the indulgences of the others when they arrived.



This I did, whereupon one of the guests remarked, "Why, Mrs Duncan, this is the very time to hold a seance. Let us ask if the boy is going to get well."

"All right," I agreed. My husband and I and four guests were standing in the bedroom where the boy was sleeping. The room was lit by incandescent gas.

Suddenly I felt something drop at my feet. I looked and saw a snowdrop. Next instant a snowdrop fell on the bed. You may imagine my feelings. I concluded these to be signs that the boy would not recover.

In an overwrought condition, I said "Let's hold a seance. I must find out what is going to happen, whether it be good or bad news."

We adjourned to the next room and sat in darkness. One of the little circle, having offered up a prayer, asked, "Is Mrs Duncan's boy going to be all right?"

How relieved I was when the answer came in the affirmative in form of three very heavy raps on the table in the centre of the room. So loud and pronounced were the raps that it seemed as if they had been registered with a heavy sledge-hammer.

### **Lifted from the Floor.**

Then came a sound which was like the flapping of the wings of a large and powerful bird. Right round the room the bird seemed to fly. When the sound ceased the voice of one of the sitters broke the stillness.

"Oh," she exclaimed, "see what I've got – a flower. It was placed in my hand."

"Oh, I've got one, too," shouted another of the sitters.

The gas was lit, and it was discovered that in the hand of each of the circle had been placed a snowdrop. We then examined the table, on which the heavy raps had been registered, and found that not the slightest mark had been made.

I felt tremendously bucked up by this seance. I was certain my boy was going to recover, and in this I was not disappointed.

By the way of an experiment it was decided to rope me to a chair to see if this would in any way interfere with the manifestations. This done the lights were extinguished, and in the darkness the trumpet was seen to move about the room just as it had done previously.

The controlling intelligence then instructed us to light up the room, and when this was done it was seen that my bonds remained intact.

"Remove the bonds. Do not put out the light; just turn it down low," was the next instruction we received, and no sooner had this been complied with than I had a feeling that the floor was receding from under me. I understand one has the same feeling when rising in an aeroplane for the first time.

At a loss to explain my sensation, I asked the sitters, "Did any of you feel any difference in the floor?"

There was a chorus of negatives, to which I replied, "Well, I did. I feel it yet. The floor seems to be going farther and farther away from me."

“It is imagination on your part,” a member of the circle suggested.

“Is it my imagination?” I remarked derisively, “Look now. I cannot touch the floor with my toes. The floor seems to sinking under me.”

“There is nothing to worry about,” interposed my husband. “You are being lifted up. Keep perfectly calm.”

By this time I was fully a foot from the floor, and I felt greatly alarmed.

“Great goodness,” I exclaimed. “They might let me fall. Think of my weight in this easy chair.”

“There is no fear of their letting you fall,” said my husband, “you will be all right.”

“Will I?” I countered. “I’m not risking it,” and with that I slid forward to the front of the chair and dropped down. The drop gave me a good shake up.

What was even more alarming, however, was the fact that no sooner had the chair been relieved of my weight than it flew right over my head to land without a sound on a big table in the centre of the circle.

### **Went into Trance.**

The chair was lifted by two male members of the circle and returned to its original position. Then from the trumpet came a voice telling us to extinguish the light. When this had been done we heard a noise which indicated that the rope with which I had been bound to the chair was being gathered up by someone.

This was confirmed when, from the trumpet, came the voice of Matthew Douglas, telling the circle that the medium was to be tied by spirit intelligences.

Quite clearly we heard the handling of the rope. I realised that my hands were being tied, and then consciousness left me.

When I regained consciousness I had the feeling of waking from a short sleep. I imagined I had just “toppled over” for a few seconds whereas I had been “away” for nearly half an hour. My hands and feet were benumbed.

“Have I been asleep?” I asked the circle.

“No, you have been in a trance,” one of the sitters replied.

“What has been happening?”

I had no recollection or knowledge of what had taken place from the moment I felt the rope on my hands. Here is an account of the seance as given to me by several of the sitters.

They had heard the handling of the rope, and next the trumpet began to circle round the room.

When the movements of the trumpet ceased a voice said, “Put up the light. Good-night.”

The gas was lit, and I was found bound to the chair and in a trance for the first time since I had begun my investigation of spiritualistic phenomena.

The sitters carefully examined my bonds. They found that the roping had been most methodically carried out. For a time they were at a loss to discover the knots, but eventually they were located under the chair. They were three in number, and were unmistakably the work of an intelligence who had had seafaring experience.

The unravelling of the knots took a considerable time, and it was during this operation that I awoke to what was going on around me.

### **First Real Trance.**

This experience, of course, was only a partial trance, and now I propose to tell you of the first occasion when I went into a complete trance, that is to say, from the beginning to the end of the seance, and when I awoke to find that I had absolutely no recollection of what had taken place in the room.

The sensations I experienced as I was falling into the trance were unforgettable. I felt as if I were going to faint, yet I felt as if I were rising into the air, not dropping as one feels when in a fainting condition.

When I became normal again I was convinced I had just recovered from a faint. I imagined I had been unconscious for only a few seconds, and was amazed when I was informed that I had been in trance for almost an hour and a half.

### **Visitors from the “Other Side.”**

As I have explained, I had no recollection of what had transpired, and for details of the seance I was indebted to the sitters. Many voices were heard, and from the “other side” several visitors had come to comfort relatives in the circle.

The last to appear was the mother-in-law of one of the sitters. She had passed on in a village in Fife only a week previously, and the ailment to which she succumbed was made plain to every member of the circle. Unfortunately I, for the time being, took on the woman’s health condition, and when I awoke I was feeling far from well.

A gentleman, whose wife had passed on twenty years ago met her again, and he was extremely happy because of the experience.

“Are you sure it was her voice you heard?” I asked him.

“Certain, absolutely certain,” he replied with sparkling eyes. “You see she mentioned things that were known to no one but ourselves. She spoke of money that I had invested in a small business and asked me if I was still getting a return for it.”

A lady told me her husband had come to her and spoken about a book she had given him as a present. She said to him, “But that book has disappeared out of the house.”

“Oh no” came the reply. “I lent it to Major —”

The lady made inquiries and confirmed the message she had received from her husband. The book had been in Major — ’s possession for nearly two years. It was very valuable, and she was glad to get it back, especially as it was a memento of her husband.

Another lady was told by her husband to consult a certain doctor, who was named, in regard to a pain in her chest. “You will require to undergo a major operation,” he explained, “but do not hesitate. There is no cause for fear. I shall be with you.”

The lady acted on this advice, and three weeks later she underwent a serious operation, from which she made a splendid recovery. She told me she felt her husband very close to her when she lapsed into unconsciousness under the anaesthetic.

### **Visited by Investigation Committee.**

After this I went into trance regularly. One night whilst I was attending a meeting of the Spiritualist Church, of which I had become a member, a gentleman approached me and asked for an invitation to the next seance to be held in my house. He was not a member of the church, but I knew he was interested in spiritualistic phenomena, so I at once complied with his request.

A day or two later I was asked to give a test sitting for the committee of this Spiritualist Church, who proposed to send an investigation committee to my house for the purpose. I agreed to this, and was surprised when the gentlemen I had invited to the seance proved to be a member of the investigation committee.

This was explained by the fact that he was an intimate friend of a committee-man of the Spiritualist Church. The deputation numbered seven, the majority of them being professional men.

“Isn’t it strange that after you had invited me here I should be asked to act on this committee?” the gentleman remarked to me.

“It is rather strange,” I replied.

The committee brought with them two ladies, and I was asked if I had any objection to their examining my clothing in an adjacent room before the seance commenced.

I said I had no objection, and the ladies carried out a very rigorous search of my clothing and person.

I was then conducted back to the room in which the seance was to be held, and placed in a chair, after which they encircled me with paper streamers. These were placed round my hands and feet in such a way that even the slightest movement would have broken several of the strands.

Shortly after the light was extinguished, I went into trance. At the conclusion of the seance it was found that not a single streamer had been broken, and the investigators, one and all, expressed their satisfaction with the results obtained.

### **A New Controlling Intelligence.**

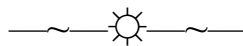
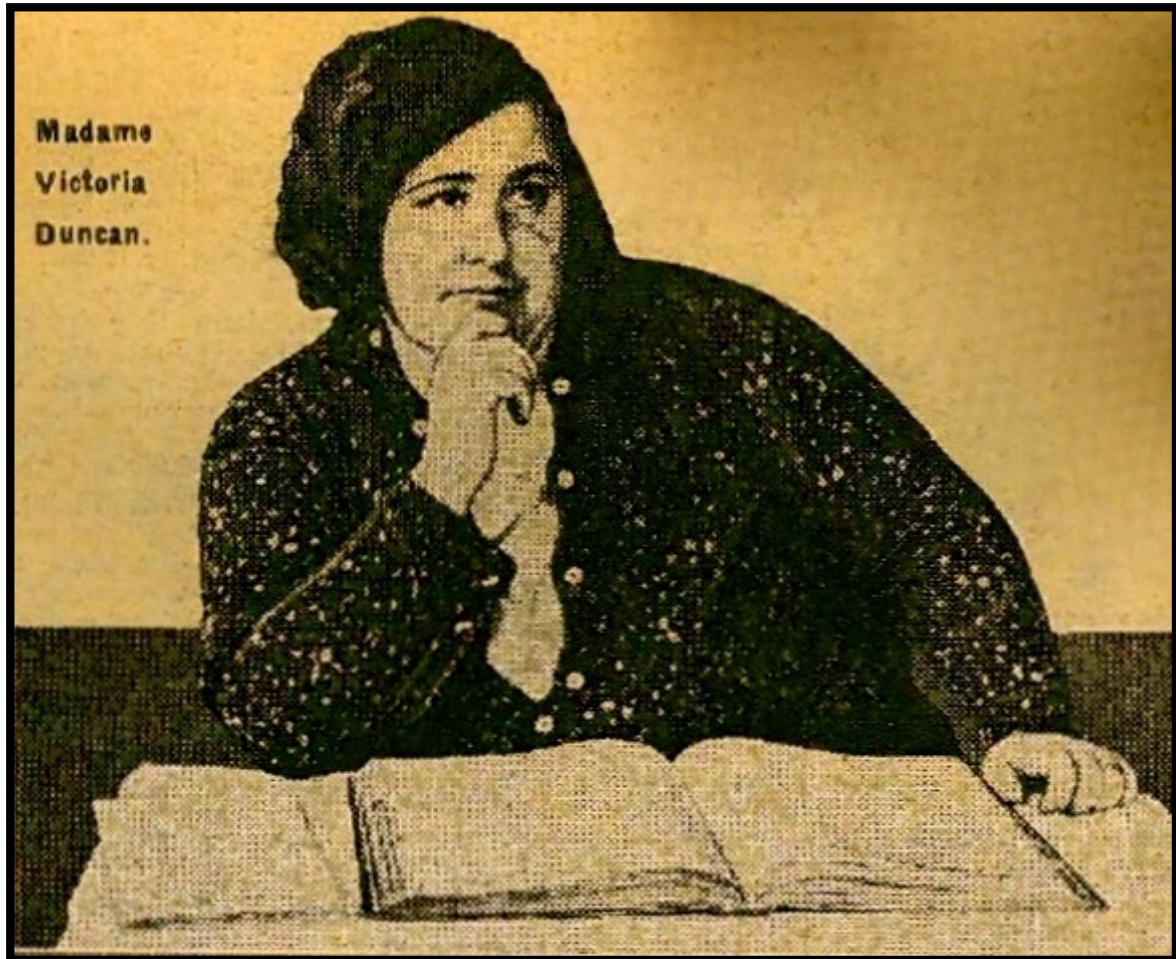
Naturally I inquired as to the nature of these. I was told that several manifestations had taken place. A sister-in-law had appeared to one gentleman, to another a son, while a third had seen his wife. The best manifestation of all was of a little girl who had appeared and spoken to her mother and father.

For fully two years I acted as medium for seances conducted on the foregoing lines, and then came a change where Matthew Douglas intimated that he was leaving us and that another controlling intelligence would take his place. The reason for the change, he explained, was that we might be enabled to obtain a different kind of phenomena.

Matthew Douglas's successor proved to be a Colonial Scot, who gave the name of Albert Stewart, and who explained that he had passed on in Sydney, Australia.

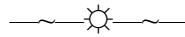
He further informed us that prior to emigrating to Australia he lived in Dundee.

Albert stated that he emigrated as a youth of 18, and had passed on 17 years later. On his instructions we used a red light at our seances, and presently we were getting some remarkable phenomena.



# AN IMPORTANT CONSIDERATION

## In the early Helen Duncan test séances



In early 2015 I tried to establish when Helen Duncan's main control, Albert Stewart, who would serve Helen for around a quarter of a century, first took over full control of the medium. My main agenda at the time was to try to find some explanation as to why her previously independent recorded *full-form materialisation* mediumship was not apparent in the early scientific test séances at the London Spiritualist Alliance (today it is known as the College for Psychic Studies). The LSA research department was called the "London Psychical Laboratory" (LPL).

From October 1930 the first series of test séances were conducted with Helen Duncan by the LPL, and later (in a different building) by the National Laboratory of Psychical Research (NLPR), starting their séances in May 1931. These series of test séances at the two institutions would damage the name of Helen Duncan for the rest of her life.

The name of Helen Duncan at the start of these test séances would not have been generally known outside Scotland. The initial séances with the LPL later led in March 1931 to Duncan being engaged under a contractual agreement for a series of regular séances, commencing on March 13th, exclusively for the LPL, with the Duncans temporarily moving to London from Dundee at the expense of the LSA.

During the initial séances in 1930 at the LSA Helen and her husband Henry met the director of the National Laboratory of Psychic Research, Harry Price. The NLPR laboratory was then situated on the top floor of the LSA. At the end of December 1930 the NLPR moved a short distance away. On May 4th 1931, apparently without the knowledge of the LSA, Duncan sat for the NLPR, effectively breaking the contract with the LSA. Duncan would sit for the NLPR on five occasions (the final séance on June 4th), resulting in the LPL bringing their contractual agreement to an end on June 12th 1931.

*Both subsequent reports were very unfavourable towards the medium  
– owing to the analyses of "ectoplasm" and the suggestion of  
"regurgitation" mentioned in both reports.*

My 2015 research to establish when Helen Duncan's main control, Albert Stewart, first took control was not straightforward, as until October 19th 1929 there are no independent reports on Duncan's mediumship and her development. The biographies, etc. had to use the Duncan family information, which is very contradictory and generally unreferenced. My initial conclusions were published in *Psypioneer*, Vol. 11, No. 2, February 2015; below is quoted from this issue:

Early reports on the development of Helen Duncan's mediumship and of her controls/guides are somewhat sketchy and appear contradictory in the published accounts of recent years. These accounts are:

Alan Crossley *The Story of Helen Duncan*, 1975, reprinted 1999

Gena Brealey *The Two Worlds of Helen Duncan*, 1985, reprinted and revised in 2008

Manfred Cassirer *Medium on Trial – The Story of Helen Duncan and The Witchcraft Act*, 1996

Mary Armour *Helen Duncan, My Living Has Not Been in Vain*, 2000

Malcolm Gaskill *Hellish Hell Last of Britain's Witches* 2001

Nina Shandler *The Strange Case of Hellish Nell*, 2006

Robert Hartley *Helen Duncan The Mystery Show Trial*, 2007

The development of Duncan's physical mediumship took place in the 1920's. A circle formed on Thursday nights, and the first sitters according to Brealey (Duncan's daughter) were Helen's husband Henry, brothers Jim & Frank Murray, and Joe Sauter. The circle was halted, according to Brealey, due to Henry having a heart attack; when it resumed, it included another sitter Mrs MacLain.<sup>11</sup> This made a total of five sitters, but Crossley adds another unnamed lady (p.19).

It is difficult to say when the circle began. Crossley gives the early part of 1926, however, this does not fit in with Brealey's account as Crossley states Henry and Helen were married in 1918, and three years later Henry had his heart attack. This would mean the circle had begun in the early 1920's (Brealey states her parents were married on May 27th 1919, Cassirer, Hartley, Shandler & Gaskill give 1916 but the general date remains as May 27th),<sup>12</sup> Hartley states the home circle began in September 1925 but there is no direct reference to this account.

The first circle control was "Dr. Williams," agreed by: Gaskill, Armour, Shandler, Brealey, and Crossley. Gaskill states "Matthew Douglas" followed Dr. Williams "... a deceased gentleman of Kirkcaldy, advised the circle to invest in a trumpet, ..." He continues: "After Matthew Douglas came the spirit of 'Donald', a controlling intelligence they all found unbearably lewd, not least Henry, ..." (p.81); only Gaskill states this actual order of controls.

Cassirer and Hartley state the first control was: "Matthew Douglas". That Donald followed Dr. Williams is stated by: Crossley, Brealey, Shandler. Gaskill states: Dr. Williams recalled Donald and replaced him with Albert Stewart. Hartley further adds (p.30), "He [Stewart] organised the séances from the spirit side of life initially along with another spirit control Dr. Henry James Williamson, another Scot, purported to be a former Unitarian Minister from Mint Street, Dundee. Henry claimed to have verified these details." It can be noted in the previous issue of *Psypioneer* "Seven Sitzings with Mrs Duncan L.S.A. – 1930-1" at the fifth sitting, on 28th November 1930:

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<sup>11</sup> Known as Mac, or Auntie Mac, to the children.

<sup>12</sup> Lis Warwood confirms: "I have found the marriage record for Helen Duncan – she married Henry Duncan on May 27, 1916, when both were just 19 years old."



The control declared himself to be not Albert, but Henry James Williamson, and that he liked everything but stubborn men and women. Albert, however, presently reported that the new control was no good, and that he would take the control over.

The development of full form materialisation is again uncertain; for example, Crossley states on p. 27 that it was after Albert and Peggy had arrived:<sup>13</sup>

“The materialisations had by now developed from small, jelly-like forms to full human figures capable of independent thought and speech.”

Hartley states on page 30:

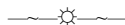
“Fully formed human figures that could speak and think independently were produced at her seances. This coincided with the appearance of a control named Albert Stewart in 1929”.

Brealey gives a vivid account of full materialisation when the circle was under the control of Donald page 53:

“He [Donald] would begin the seance by opening the curtains of the cabinet, standing at one side while the entranced Helen sat in her upright chair. He would then ask the sitters if they could see them both, after which Helen would be asked to stand up, sit down, walk around the room, then return to sit again on her chair in the cabinet while Donald remained beside her chair ...

The circle members around this period were asked by Donald to invite two or three visitors to the weekly circle so evidence could be given to a wider audience:

“By this time materialisation was a regular occurrence. As each materialised spirit appeared, Donald could give full name, cause of so-called death, and date of passing.”



As we can note, no firm, referenced information can be gained as to when Albert Stewart first took full control of Helen Duncan. Robert Hartley speaks of “the appearance of a control named Albert Stewart in 1929” but there is no reference or information given.

However, it does appear that full-form materialisations were being produced by Duncan. In February this year my appetite was again awakened when I found an article by Helen Duncan, “My First Experiences in Trances”, republished in *Pioneer*, Vol. 4, No. 1, February 2017. In the article Duncan mentions only two controls; firstly she states, “The first voice we heard claimed to be Matthew Douglas and stated he was a native of Kirkcaldy [...] He urged us to continue our trumpet sittings and promised some wonderful manifestations if we did so.”

Duncan further stated:

For fully two years I acted as medium for seances conducted on the foregoing lines, and then came a change where Matthew Douglas intimated that he was leaving us and that another controlling intelligence would take his place. The reason for the change, he explained, was that we might be enabled to obtain a different kind of phenomena.

Matthew Douglas’s successor proved to be a Colonial Scot, who gave the name of Albert Stewart, and who explained that he had passed on in Sydney, Australia.

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<sup>13</sup> Page 27, reprint edition, 1999 – page 34, first issue, 1975.



Unfortunately, no indication of the date is given. The first published independent report previously mentioned was by James Souter, published in "Light", October 19th 1929. The report notes that Duncan "is a remarkable trumpet Medium, but what is more important is the materialisations which have taken place since she developed this type of phenomenon in March of this year." The short report states:

The forms build up clearly and distinctly (as many as fourteen have manifested at one sitting); they speak clearly, giving their names and other convincing particulars, answer satisfactorily all questions put to them, they handle objects both light and heavy play musical instruments. They have brought articles from other rooms and other houses at a distance apart. The Guides, three in number, are good hard-headed, canny Scotsmen who know what they are about, carry out their part with precision and dignity and have a right sense of their responsibility. Mr. J. B. McIndoe, of Glasgow, and Mr. Herbert Hill,<sup>14</sup> president of the Bon Accord Spiritualist Church witnessed these materialisations and were so impressed that they have invited Mrs. Duncan to give a series of sésances in Glasgow.

John McIndoe, SNU President 1930-1938, would give the first detailed independent report on two sittings he attended. He published a report on the Duncan mediumship in the SNU journal, "The National Spiritualist", October issue, 1929; this was republished in "Pioneer", Vol. 2, No. 3, May 2015.

The article does not mention Duncan by name, McIndoe records:

"The forms were distinctive, varied, lifelike and noiseless in their movements, not one of them remotely resembled the medium in build. Their voices were also distinctive and quite different from the medium's. Nothing in any way suggesting trickery of any kind was observed"



"Soon another voice is heard calling "Mother" and a young girl emerged from the curtains, came over and spoke to one of the new lady sitters, who recognised her as her daughter. She conversed with her in a low tone, apparently giving a comforting message, and handed her mother a rose, taken from a bunch placed in the cabinet.

"Then another girl form of different build took her place, coming from the other side of the cabinet, and was claimed as her sister by one of the ladies. She also brought a rose with her"

"I need not describe all the forms who appeared. There were eight of them, one child, two young girls and an older woman, and four men. Six of them came right out in front of the curtains, and seven of the eight spoke to us. One of the controls "Donald" had quite a conversation with us. He was a well built man. By request he brought a mandoline from the cabinet, and twanged the strings. We could easily see the hand which held it, but not the one which touched the strings. Finally he handed it to a sitter. He was asked to touch my outstretched hand. This has not previously been done. He appeared to make several attempts to do so. On the last his hand was plainly visible above mine, but he failed to touch it, and disappeared very suddenly, while the medium gave vent to a groan as if in pain. At the conclusion of the sitting there was blood on her mouth and chin, and some

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<sup>14</sup> Scottish District Council: Aberdeen Bon Accord National Spiritualist Church, Room No. 2, Shepherd's Hall, Union Terrace, Aberdeen. President: Herbert Hill. Hon. Secretary and Treasurer: Mrs Bowman, 4 Claremont Place, Aberdeen.

had trickled down on her dress. This had occurred on previous occasions when a form suddenly vanished for some reason or other.

“At the second sitting “Donald” was asked about it and explained that he had come out too far. On that occasion something did touch my hand, held close up to the curtain. It had the appearance of a stump with two fingers, and was rather hard, but the contact was too brief to allow any definite opinion to be formed.

“The notable features of the second seance were that there were two children right out moving in the circle at the same time. They came one from each side of the curtains. Later on by request of a sitter two apports were brought. One was a small ornament from the room below.”

It can be noted that Souter and McIndoe refer to multiple controls/guides; however, Albert Stewart is not mentioned by name. It may appear that in October 1929 he was not yet present and not in full control or named!

### **A critical point of observation may have been overlooked!**

It may well be assumed that at some unspecified date later than October 1929 Albert Stewart was to take full control of Helen Duncan. We have seen that the history of the alleged controls is far from precise, with many contradictions. The most precise, on the surface, would be the independent reports by former SNU President John McIndoe, who mentions Donald as “one of the controls”, which does give some consistency to the various reports that Albert followed Donald. However, the medium in her own words contradicts this by stating quite precisely that after two years with Matthew Douglas Albert followed. The truth is at present not within our grasp.

What is clear is that full-form materialisation was in force and vouched for by the independent reports regardless of who the control/s were – which was not demonstrated at any of the test séances of 1930-1931.

At present, it seems that the name ‘Albert Stewart’ did not appear (at least publicly) until around August 1930 in an article by Harvey Metcalfe. The preliminary reports from the London Psychical Laboratory did start with satisfactory encouraging results for the investigators, for example as published in “Light”, May 16th 1931:

The production of “ectoplasm” has taken place at all sittings but varies in quantity from time to time. The ectoplasmic emanations usually issue from the mouth of the Medium.

The substance is as a rule white, but may be sometimes described as grey or slate colour, and a few times has appeared a dark brown. It is motile and seems to possess a sort of vitality. It bunches, folds and unfolds, divides into portions and joins up again.<sup>15</sup>

The “ectoplasm” has been produced in such quantities that the Medium when standing up has been covered over the head, round the shoulders, and over the whole of the body down to the feet. On two occasions it was produced while the Medium stood under the light.

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<sup>15</sup> The second sitting at the LSA on October 30th 1930 records: “Sir Oliver Lodge went up to the medium and held the substance in his hand, and he and the sitters saw it gradually with a slightly wriggling motion withdraw, sliding slowly over his hands towards the position of the medium [and] disappear while he was holding it.” The full report is published in *Psypioneer*, Vol. 12, No. 2, March 2016.

The Medium came out of the cabinet with no “ectoplasm” showing and stood under the red light at a distance of about eighteen inches; the mouth opened and the substance was seen gradually forming on the tip of the tongue until it resembled a cherry. It afterwards swelled up in the mouth unfolded and hung down about eight inches from the mouth. The substance moved slightly and remained for about one minute; then it began to retreat into the mouth, and gradually disappeared until the mouth, wide open, was seen perfectly empty. The Medium, still in trance, then backed into the cabinet.

It was clearly observed that, during the emergence and disappearance of the substance, no movement of the Medium’s throat, neck or body was apparent. No muscular contractions suggesting swallowing or vomiting occurred.

It should also be realised that when the substance retreated into the mouth, it diminished at the tip of the tongue into the likeness of a cherry as it at first appeared.

The cherry-like mass disappeared into a small point and finally vanished altogether. None of the substance appeared at any time in the pharynx.

Sometimes, when large masses of the substance begin to lessen in bulk, it appears to melt away first at the edges.

Throughout all the sittings with both laboratories the phenomena were generally *ectoplasmic formations*; they did not reach to full-form materialisations, with different independent voices of materialised forms – including children’s voices or trumpet phenomena, as the quoted independent reports suggest. Only the Metcalfe report of a séance on August 20th 1930 names the alleged Albert Stewart, so we know from this date that he was operational and using Mrs. Duncan.

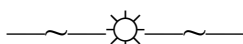
The séance was held in a house, possibly at the Duncans’ home in Dundee. It is apparent that Albert’s practice of showing his medium and himself standing together at the beginning of each séance had begun by the report republished in *Psypioneer*, Vol. 11, No. 2, February 2015. It can be noted in the report that other materialisations with Albert were being produced in the circle.

## *An Important Consideration – In Helen Duncan’s Early Test Séances*

Although the exact dates are not established we *know* by the independent October 1929 reports that Albert was not the main control and may not always have been active.

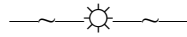
We also know he was the last control to take over!

This may go some way to explaining why there was a decline or drop in the phenomena exhibited to the researchers! It was because Albert (on the present known information) would be basically out of the development/home circle, as the most prominent full-form materialisation mediumship, etc. through Helen Duncan was exhibited by Donald and Matthew Douglas over some years, not by Albert.

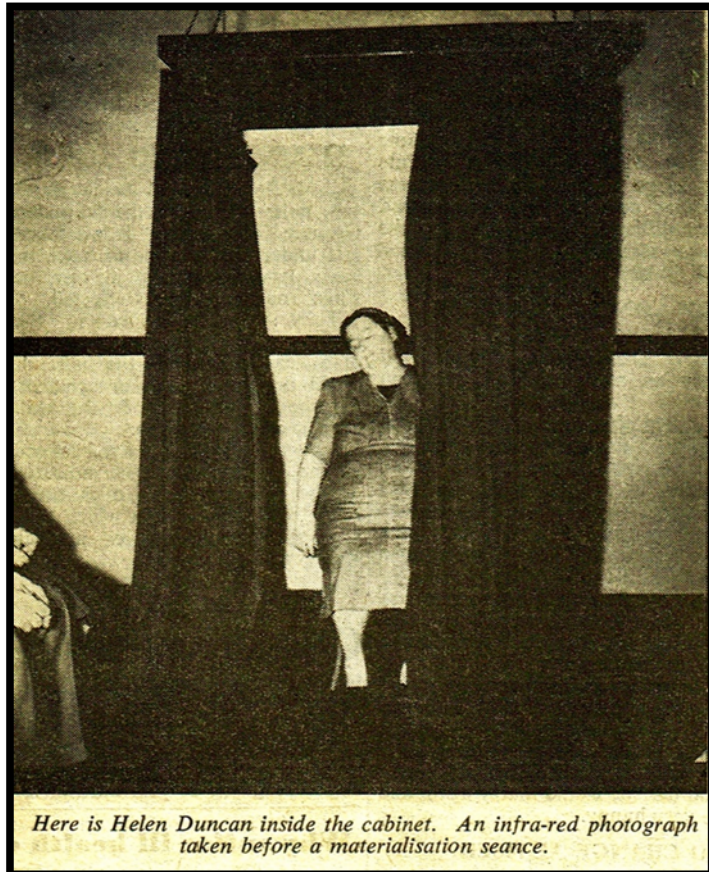


# HELEN DUNCAN SEIZED AT A SÉANCE IN 1956

*Police searching for beards, masks and a “shroud”*



On November 10th 1956 the “Two Worlds” reported that Helen Duncan had been grabbed in a police raid at a private seance in Nottingham on October 28th, this time not because the medium was breaking the Vagrancy or Witchcraft Acts, as they were changed/repealed six years previously, in 1951.<sup>5</sup>



*Here is Helen Duncan inside the cabinet. An infra-red photograph taken before a materialisation seance.*

## POLICE RAID HELEN DUNCAN SEANCE

*Medium grabbed and  
searched after cabinet  
is torn down*

NOTTINGHAM police broke into a Helen Duncan seance last week, grabbing the medium, searching her, taking flashlight pictures in a series of happenings “reminiscent of an American gangster film,” says our correspondent.

They shouted that they were looking for beards, masks and a “shroud” which they alleged were the fraudulent means by which she produced her materialisations. But they found nothing.

The seances were held in the home of J. Timmins, a physiotherapist and healer. On the Saturday night a patient, later discovered to be a policewoman, attended with a man she said was her husband, but who was a policeman in disguise. Nobody materialised for them.

When it was all over and they were chatting over a cup of tea with the rest of the sitters they said how wonderful the sitting had been. These two people had also booked for the Sunday night seance for themselves and for two friends.

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<sup>5</sup> The image shown is said to be an infra-red photograph. This is interesting, as I am aware of only one other image of Duncan using infra-red photography, which was in Belfast in 1932 by Mr Donaldson. Please see Pioneer, Vol. 4, No. 1, February 2017. We can note in the image shown that Mrs Duncan is in in her later years, but it appears it was not taken at the residence of Timmins in Nottingham, as they used the corner of the room where Duncan was seized.

In many of Duncan’s seances the cabinet was in the corner of the room, with a makeshift cabinet comprising a curtain-pole and two curtains. We can note in this photograph that it seems to be a purpose-built room, not using a corner, and the cabinet is suspended from the ceiling.

### *Law interrupts*

After this seance had been in progress for 20 minutes, banging was heard on the outside door accompanied by the bell ringing. Albert, her control, who was speaking through the medium, asked Mrs. Timmins and Mrs. G. Hamilton, the medium's friend who had accompanied her, to take care of Helen Duncan.

When the door was opened the police came in. According to Timmins' account they made a dive over the sitters in the front row and tore down the curtains which formed a cabinet in a corner of the room.

Then two policewomen grabbed the medium while policemen took flashlight photographs. By this time the lights were put on. One policeman ran downstairs to admit other officers, among them an inspector.

Mrs. Hamilton and Mrs. Timmins tried to pull away the policewomen who had started to search Helen Duncan. They said they were looking for the "shroud." This presumably referred to the white mass of ectoplasm out of which figures usually materialise at her seances.

Mrs. Duncan, as part of her normal seance procedure, wore black undergarments—she never wears white to prevent confusion with the ectoplasm.

The inspector ordered everyone to stay where they were. Then he changed his mind, told them to go to another room and not to leave until their names were taken.

### *Mrs. Duncan's burns*

In all this excitement Timmins forgot to ask the police whether they had a search warrant. He insisted, however, that every sitter should be searched, but the inspector said that if he interfered with the proceedings it would be his duty to arrest him.

Timmins went over to Helen Duncan and saw that she was ill. Later there were two burns on her stomach. She was controlled by Albert, who asked for a doctor to be called. The medical man arrived within five minutes.

Seeing how ill the medium was, he obtained police permission to take her to a bedroom where he treated her for shock. Even then the policewoman insisted on accompanying him.

The doctor was then allowed to make a search. He said he found nothing on her that could have produced any fraudulent results.

The police questioned Mrs. Duncan for about one and a half hours. In turn, every one of the 20 sitters was questioned. All the time the police kept asking for masks, beards and shroud.

Timmins and the others replied that the seance proceedings had been genuine and that no matter how much the police searched they would not find evidence of fraud.

None of the sitters left till 11.45 p.m., about two and a half hours afterwards. Even then the inspector later telephoned Timmins to ask if he could arrange a seance with Helen Duncan at which he could take another photograph by infra-red or otherwise.

### ***“Come clean”***

If this proved to be genuine, he said he would drop the case and they would hear no more about it. It was suggested by him that the flashlight photographs had revealed nothing that could be construed as incriminating.

Timmins replied that the police had no evidence of fraud against Helen Duncan. In her present condition he was sure the doctor would not sanction another seance, as the police had already done her a lot of harm.

A police search of the house and the luggage of both the medium and her companion revealed nothing.

The police returned again two days later to question Helen Duncan and Mrs. Hamilton. Again and again they asked the medium to “come clean,” to tell them where she kept the beards and moustaches with which the forms had appeared—this time there was no mention of any shroud.

The police suggested that as she was “getting old” they would “make it easy” for her. When they left they said she might be charged under the Fraudulent Mediums’ Act of 1951 because they alleged that one materialised figure which came for a policewoman was that of a man who was still alive.

If the medium were charged, said the police, Timmins would also be prosecuted with aiding and abetting.



The following week the “Two Worlds” continues these dramatic events:

### **POLICE USE “GESTAPO METHODS” TO BREAK UP SEANCE?**

ON Monday, four days after *Two Worlds* printed exclusively the account of Nottingham police raiding a Helen Duncan materialisation seance, grabbing the medium and searching her, the story was printed by most of the leading national newspapers. Some published headlines across six columns.

The medium is now in Edinburgh’s Western General Hospital, “obviously the result of these terrible happenings at Nottingham,” says her husband.

A “Daily Herald” reporter was told by the hospital that she was receiving treatment for diabetes. A “Daily Mail” reporter was told that she was “comfortable.” A “Daily Telegraph” reporter said that immediately she returned home she became ill. A “News Chronicle” reporter said she suffered so badly from shock that she was now “very ill” in hospital.

A police official denied to the “Daily Express” that there was any rough handling and said, “The matter is still under consideration.”

This followed its account that John Timmins, in whose house the police raid occurred, said, “I protested to the police about the manner of the search.”

Several newspapers stated that Spiritualists were angry over the police interruption while the medium was in trance and “are protesting against what they call Gestapo methods.”

“Surely my wife will have a champion from among the thousands to whom she has been the humble means of bringing solace and comfort in their hour of sorrow,” says the medium’s husband, who refers to her “terrible and ignominious ordeal” at the hands of the police.

He understands, he says, that the papers concerning the case have been sent to the Director of Public Prosecutions. Meanwhile an attempt is being made to get a question asked of the Home Secretary in the House of Commons.

A Taunton Spiritualist says that three years ago, after Helen Duncan had given three successful materialisation seances in that town, they were visited by the police and “found ourselves in the midst of investigations which went on for six weeks.”

Their home was turned upside down. Nothing material was found and the matter was “shelved as no cause for complaint.”

Typical of the sentiments expressed in letters and telephone calls we have received is the following.

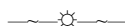
***“Shocking methods”***

**I WAS** so shocked by the inhuman treatment meted out to Helen Duncan by the Nottingham police that I feel the matter must not be allowed to rest there.

The police acted illegally, and overstepped the bounds of their duty in manhandling a woman, who is presumably innocent until proved guilty. They also apparently accused her of fraud.

These shocking methods on the part of the police should rouse the whole Spiritualist world to action.

If illegal and brutal methods such as these are to be tolerated there will slowly be no freedom in anything. Heaven knows what will be the results on Mrs. Duncan’s health, through shock.—J. Allen, 15 Sunderland Terrace, London, W.2.





Further, the “Two Worlds” continues its coverage on December 15th, 1956:

## **Helen Duncan's husband to sue police for damages**

*She dies five weeks after they raided seance*

**BY MAURICE BARBANELL**

HELEN DUNCAN’S husband decided, on my advice, when I saw him in his Edinburgh home last Saturday, to bring an action for damages against the Nottingham police. They raided and broke up the medium’s last materialisation seance, while she was still in trance, five weeks before she passed on.

The family lawyer had urged Henry Duncan to institute proceedings and vindicate his wife’s name. But Duncan was concerned, among other problems, about the costs. I told him not to worry. The Movement, I said, would be behind him.

He then telephoned the lawyer and instructed him to take the necessary legal steps. They will also press for a public inquiry into the police conduct.

**Helen Duncan died on  
December 6th 1956**



After discussing all the issues involved with Duncan, I was delighted to find the whole large family unanimously agreed on these steps.

Helen’s passing, two days earlier, at the age of 59, ended what many Spiritualists regarded as the martyrdom she had endured since 1933, four years after her psychic career began, when she was convicted and fined for fraud in an Edinburgh court.

“The verdict was against the weight of the evidence,” said the SNU’s exponents’ committee, an opinion endorsed by the Union’s next annual general meeting.

Eleven years later she was convicted under the notorious and antiquated Witchcraft Act of 1735 and sent to prison for nine months. In the opinion of leading Spiritualists this was a gross miscarriage of justice.

### ***Up to the court***

Now that legal proceedings against the police are being instituted it will be for the court to decide to what extent Mrs. Duncan’s passing was due to the raid.

“MEDIUM’S DEATH BLAMED ON RAID” was the “Daily Express” headline last Saturday. “TWO BLAME SHOCK IN TRANCE FOR MEDIUM’S DEATH” was the one used by the “Empire News.”

Her death certificate cited “diabetes and heart failure” as the causes.



The family maintained, “There can be little doubt that the police action hastened her death.

“Despite long ill-health.” They added in their statement, “she continued to put Spiritualism before self and personal discomfort, which mattered little in the furtherance of what she believed to be her duty.”

Even when Helen was in Holloway jail in 1944 she had constant medical attention for diabetes, angina pectoris and valvular disease of the heart.

The Rev. Thomas Jeffrey, a Church of Scotland minister who conducted the cremation service last Monday, has described her as “Scotland’s Joan of Arc.” His conviction of Spiritualism was partly based on attending her seances for about 15 years.

“The shock suffered by the police interruptions at a private seance on October 28, 1956,” said the family, caused such mental suffering that she was not the same woman from that hour. We feel that her faith in human justice was so shaken that there was nothing more to live for.”

### ***“Come home to die”***

When Mrs. Duncan left home, the family told me, “she looked well, with colour in her cheeks.” After Nottingham, she looked as if she had “come home to die, with all the world’s cares on her shoulders.”

Ever since her return home Helen had constant medical treatment, both in hospital and at home.

Her shock was increased a few days before her passing when Nottingham’s Chief Constable wrote her saying that all the papers in connection with her last seance had been sent to the Director of Public Prosecutions. His letter was surprising, as there had been no communication between them.

Henry Duncan described the letter as “cruel—after a month’s lapse to send this to her, knowing the state of her health.”

She had to have medical attention for shock after the police broke up the seance while she was in trance, grabbed her and shone white flashlights on her. They searched her and subjected her to 90 minutes’ questioning.

Spiritualists who were present described the raid as “Gestapo-like” and “reminiscent of an American gangster film.” But a police officer denied that anybody had been handled roughly.

Though Mrs. Duncan, her luggage and the house were all searched—the police said they were looking for false masks, beards and a shroud—nothing incriminating was found.

I was able to give Henry Duncan a spirit message from his wife when I called. On the previous night in Glasgow, Margaret Lyon, the healer who is also clairvoyant, told me that Helen wanted me to give her love to “Hen,” the nickname she always used for her husband.

Though it was only a day after her passing, she had met her beloved daughter, Nan, and had been greeted by Albert, her chief control at all her seances, who had sustained

her through all the dark hours. Finally, Helen commented that the spirit world was even more wonderful than she had hoped.

Margaret knew about Helen's passing before the news was published. On the day of her death the healer was conscious of the unmistakable odour of the ectoplasm, as she had experienced it at the many seances Helen had given in her home.

The Duncan family were delighted to get the message. The husband, the three daughters, the two sons, and their husbands and wives are all Spiritualists—Helen's extraordinary mediumship convinced them long ago.

And their behaviour was impressive. They were performing all their household duties with a calmness of demeanour that was admirable. They were a magnificent example of how Spiritualists should behave when faced with bereavement's acid test.

Soon after I arrived, Henry Duncan quoted his lawyer's opinion that he had excellent grounds for action against the police. Henry—I have known him and his children for 25 years — sought my opinion on instituting proceedings.

In view of the long controversy that had raged round his wife's mediumship, he asked, would he have the Spiritualist movement behind him? I assured him that the overwhelming majority would support him.

As a typical example of his wife's selflessness, he said that when she came home she was worried about whether news of the police seizure had caused anxiety to her family.

### ***“I can't leave you”***

Soon after the raid, and before she returned to Edinburgh, Helen's astral form appeared to him. “What's wrong?” he asked. Sobbing, she replied: “I was going to leave you, but I can't.” This he understood to mean that she fought against dying.

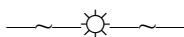
He recalled a statement she had often made: “I will never live to see another trial.” I reminded him of another saying, prophetically fulfilled: “I will survive those who accused me.” She named these antagonists who had all passed over.

I was surprised to see her coffin. It seemed too small for the body of a woman who weighed 20 stone when last we met. But, I learned, her weight had gone down to 12 stone towards the end.

Helen was one of the most remarkable mediums to appear on the Spiritualist scene. Her seances, held in good red light during the past 27 years, must have been attended by thousands. Many of them testified to seeing loved ones materialise and hearing their typical voices.

This accumulated evidence from apparently solid forms, who reproduced their earthly bodies, included their speaking in foreign languages that the medium did not know.

Mrs. Duncan always insisted that she be searched by women sitters before every seance.



The article continues about her trial at the Old Bailey, which does not concern us now...

## Editor's endnote:

Without doubt this is one of the most disturbing stories in our history; Charles E. Loseby, her defence barrister during her 1944 Old Bailey trial (assisted by Mr. T. S. Pedler), was appointed by the Spiritualists' National Union solicitor, Godfrey A. Elkin. Loseby from his Guernsey home was outspoken after the Nottingham police seizure and the death of Helen Duncan, stating in law that any person who by "gross negligence accelerates the death of another is guilty of murder. I personally, therefore, am satisfied that Helen Duncan was murdered."

One of the most important functions of "Psypioneer", and now of the Spiritualists' National Union's publication "Pioneer", is to present the CORRECT FACTS concerning Spiritualist history, etc.

In the first of these articles concerning the seizure of Helen Duncan I removed the footnote at the end of the article which stated:

**Footnote.** Helen Duncan was convicted wrongly in the opinion of Spiritualists—a few years ago under the old Witchcraft Act. It was this conviction that led to Spiritualists campaigning to change the antiquated law that robbed them of religious freedom. The Fraudulent Mediums' Act was the result.

This conviction in *fact* had nothing to do with the *campaigning to change the antiquated law*. The petitioning of Parliament had been in progress since the arrest of Henry Slade, shortly after the first imprisonment of a Spiritualist medium, Francis Monck, under Section 4 of the 1824 Vagrancy Act. The British National Association of Spiritualists (BNAS) 'Spiritualists' Defence Committee' was the first to challenge the Conservative government's Right Honorable R. A. Cross, Secretary of State for the Home Department, as to the rights of Spiritualist mediums in November 1876.

In 1916 the Spiritualists' National Union, under their President and Vice-President, Ernest Oaten and James J. Morse respectively, set up the "Spiritualist Parliamentary Fund", which was inaugurated at the July AGM; it was this fund (under later name changes) which would pay for all of Helen Duncan's court costs.

"Pioneer" has published in six parts, beginning in Vol. 2, No. 1, January 2015: *The Effect of the Vagrancy Act – The Work of the Spiritualists' National Union*.

## Recap on the police raid:

The above articles hinge on the police raiding the private residence of Mr and Mrs Joe Timmins, violently breaking up a private Helen Duncan séance, grabbing the entranced medium, taking flashlight pictures and searching her and the premises. The police shouted that they were looking for beards, masks and a "shroud" which they alleged were the fraudulent means by which Duncan produced her materialisations. But they found nothing. It was later found on the previous day's séance held on Saturday October 27th that an undercover policewoman (PC Cutts) with a man she said was her husband attended.<sup>6</sup> They both booked for the Sunday séance and for two friends.

At the Sunday séance, after twenty minutes banging was heard on the outside door accompanied by the bell ringing; according to Joe Timmins' account:

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<sup>6</sup> Joe Timmins' account is published in "Helen Duncan: My Living Has Not Been in Vain", by Mary Armour, 2000 pages. On pages 77-88 Timmins states that he was aware the lady was a policewoman, as he had previously treated her for a foot condition; she had recently married Mr Cutts.

“... they [Cutts and three others] made a dive over the sitters in the front row and tore down the curtains which formed a cabinet in a corner of the room. Then two policewomen grabbed the medium while policemen took flashlight photographs. By this time the lights were put on. One policeman ran downstairs to admit other officers, among them an inspector [Detective Inspector Smalley]. Mrs. Hamilton and Mrs. Timmins tried to pull away the policewomen who had started to search Helen Duncan. They said they were looking for the “shroud.” This presumably referred to the white mass of ectoplasm out of which figures usually materialise at her seances.”

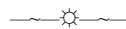
The sitters were ordered into another room and detained for about two and a half hours after the raid; Timmins forgot to ask the police whether they had a search warrant. He insisted, however, that every sitter should be searched, but the inspector said that if he interfered with the proceedings it would be his duty to arrest him.

Duncan was clearly ill and still allegedly under the control of Albert Stewart; Albert asked for a doctor to be called, who arrived within five minutes. The doctor obtained police permission to take Duncan to a bedroom and she was treated for shock, accompanied by a policewoman. The doctor searched Helen; he found nothing on her that could have produced any fraudulent results. The police questioned Duncan for around one and a half hours and searched her and her companion’s luggage.

The inspector later telephoned Timmins to ask if he could arrange a seance with Duncan “at which he could take another photograph by infra-red or otherwise.”<sup>7</sup> According to Timmins, the inspector further said that, if this proved to be genuine, he would drop the case and they would hear no more about it. It was suggested by him that the flashlight photographs had revealed nothing that could be construed as incriminating.

Two days later the police returned and again questioned Duncan and her companion, Mrs. Hamilton, asking the medium to “come clean”, to tell them where she kept the beards and moustaches with which the forms had appeared—this time there was no mention of any shroud.

Helen was warned she might be charged under the Fraudulent Mediums Act of 1951 because they alleged that one materialised figure which came for a policewoman was that of a man who was still alive. If the medium was charged, Joe Timmins would also probably be prosecuted for aiding and abetting. Shortly after Duncan ended up in Edinburgh’s Western General Hospital she died five weeks later from diabetes and heart failure on December 6th 1956 at her home in Edinburgh.



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<sup>7</sup> This comment may suggest that, as well as flashlight bulbs, infra-red was used; it would be of interest to know whether these photographs are still archived by Nottingham police at present; I am looking into this.

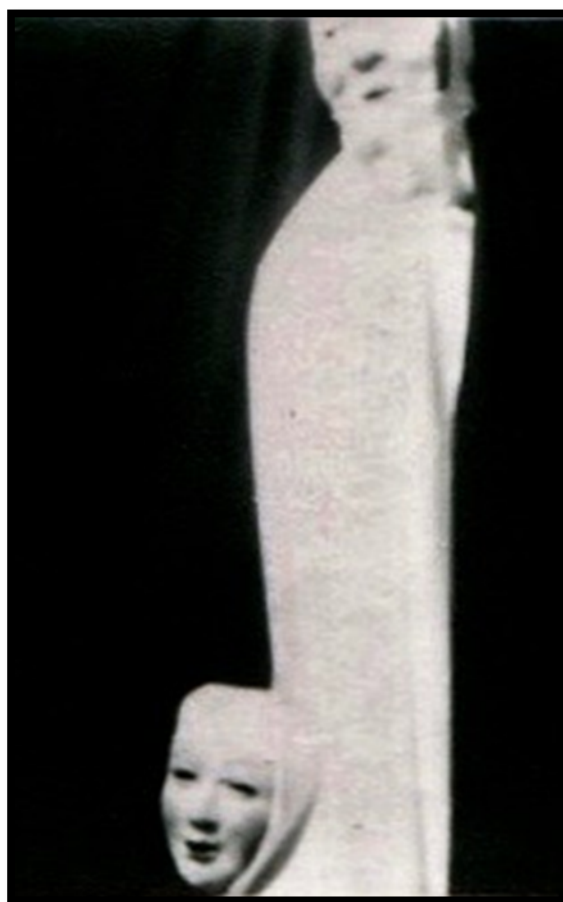
## What can we make of these unprecedented events under the Fraudulent Mediums Act of 1951 – which led directly or indirectly to Duncan’s death?

It may be considered by some that this is reminiscent of the police undercover officers in the previous seances in 1944 and the seizure of the medium – resulting in Duncan being sentenced to nine months’ imprisonment under a clause in the Witchcraft Act.

The police raid in 1944 at Portsmouth showed that no incriminating evidence was found; this was also the case at Nottingham. At Portsmouth the sitters asked to be searched; the police refused. This appears to be the case at Nottingham. We can note that Timmins “insisted, however, that every sitter should be searched...” Timmins was told not to interfere.

One can only speculate as to why at Nottingham there was such a police presence, including four undercover officers and a Detective Inspector. A month later, a few days before Duncan’s death, Nottingham’s Chief Constable wrote to her informing her that all the papers in connection with her séance had been sent to the Director of Public Prosecutions.

As no material, incriminating evidence was found, all that remained was the undercover police testimony that one materialised figure which came for a policewoman was that of a man who was still alive.



The photographs shown here were taken at a Helen Duncan séance on March 8th, 1939 in the Cheltenham area. It was common for Duncan’s materialisations to show beards, etc.; we can note the gentleman has a rather well-established moustache. Depending which side of the fence we sit, some could suggest the faces are mask-like. The figures are shrouded, so one can understand why the police were *searching for beards, masks and a “shroud”* if Duncan was considered a fraud.

But, of course, no such items were found. The images are part of the Britten Museum & Library, housed at Stansted Hall.

Nothing is noted in the reports about payments made to Duncan. The undercover police officers witnessed two séances and booked for two friends on the evening of the raid. This was Duncan’s income, so no doubt fees would change hands. If

the police had previous evidence of any fraudulent activity on an ongoing inquiry and of money being taken, this could put their action into a better perspective. [Duncan's fee<sup>8</sup>] Any pre-existing evidence would not be revealed until the inquiry was completed and charges brought forward. Duncan died before any charges existed.

Malcolm Gaskill, in his book, "Hellish Nell", makes reference on page 352:

"... it is likely that either the Director of Public Prosecutions or the Chief Constable contacted the Home Office, because on 15 November Helen Duncan files from 1944 were called up from the archive."

As noted, Nottingham's Chief Constable wrote to Helen Duncan a few days before her death informing her that all the papers in connection with her last seance had been sent to the Director of Public Prosecutions. So, for whatever reason, it appears the police were once again out to get Helen Duncan and the prosecution was ongoing to her death, but, unlike in 1944, holding a séance in 1956 was perfectly legal.

Maurice Barbanell makes a valuable comment in his column, "All Worlds Are One", in the "Two Worlds", November 17th, 1956, as quoted below:

THE medium was warned privately by us some months ago from information received that the police were after her again and that she should be on her guard.

It behoves her, and the organisers of her seances, to take rigid precautions to ensure that nobody attends her sittings unless they can be vouched for. They should be on their guard against agents provocateurs, police officers in disguise, seeking material for a prosecution.

The methods invoked by the Nottingham police, described as "reminiscent of an American gangster film," must have had their origin in some "complaint." This may be genuine or, as in the past, due to the malice of vested interests, too often belonging to opposing religions that wish to destroy mediumship.

THE Nottingham case has been referred to the Spiritualists' National Union and the Spiritualist Council for Common Action to see if any legal or constitutional issues are involved.

It must be pointed out, however, that Helen Duncan no longer works under the aegis of the SNU, having withdrawn from that organisation. Neither were the Nottingham seances held in a Spiritualist church where, if there is police interference, the cry of religious freedom can be raised.

Regarding the break between Helen Duncan and the SNU which resulted in the suspension of her certificate in 1945, the full story is published in "Pioneer", Vol. 2, No. 5, September 2015: "Why did the S.N.U. remove Helen Duncan's diploma in 1945?"

The reasons behind the police raid and whether or not a prosecution would have been undertaken against Helen Duncan if she had lived remain a mystery.

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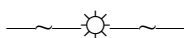
<sup>8</sup> Timmins, in his statement referred to in footnote 6, gives the details: "We usually have about eight sitters who pay from 10-11 shillings, then many of our personal friends who come free ..." Duncan received free accommodation, etc. and kept all the fees paid.

To conclude, Malcolm Gaskill raises a few interesting points on page 356 of his book:

The drive to remember Helen Duncan, and to see justice done, started from the moment she died. Within a week, *Two Worlds* was inviting contributions to a memorial fund and the Home Secretary, Gwilym Lloyd George, was pestered until he replied that the matter had to be taken up with the Chief Constable of Nottingham. In the end the fund money was not spent in the intended manner. Henry, a man crumbling inside, was being cared for by Gena and was in no state to organize his own affairs, let alone a lawsuit. In any case his solicitor, who at first had been optimistic about their chances, now advised him to drop the case due to insufficient medical evidence to suggest that the police had caused Helen's death.

In addition, Percy Wilson was concerned that if the case was made *sub judice*,<sup>9</sup> it might hold up action and comment in other quarters. Mr Timmins dropped his action too, announcing piously that turning the other cheek was behaviour more befitting a Spiritualist. Why Helen Duncan had been raided again after all these years therefore remains a mystery. There were no rumours of conspiracy, as in 1944, and probably local police simply heard about the seances, perhaps after receiving a complaint, and intervened to protect the public. That said, prosecutions under the Fraudulent Mediums Act were very rare.

And there is one final intriguing piece of evidence: the Anglo-French landings to reclaim the Suez Canal, which involved the Secret Service, were the largest British seaborne military operation since D-Day. The coincidence — and it is surely no more than that — is stranger because the police raid occurred less than thirty-six hours before the assault against Egypt began.



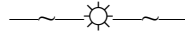
**Victoria Helen MacFarlane & Henry Duncan married on  
May 27th 1916**

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<sup>9</sup> Under judicial consideration and therefore prohibited from public discussion elsewhere.



# THE “OLD BAILEY” COMES TO STANSTED HALL



*A spectacular re-enactment of the events of the 1944 trial which would bring about the imprisonment of Helen Duncan*



On Tuesday December 12th 2017 the Arthur Findlay College lecture room was transformed into the Central Criminal Court, Old Bailey, E.C.4. Paul Gaunt explains the set-up to SNU President David Bruton, who was to play the SNU defence of Helen Duncan and her fellow defendants.

After the primary introductions by the College Manager, Tanya Smith, the total re-enactment lasted two hours and twenty-five minutes. Throughout the proceedings a continued silence prevailed from the audience, with only a short adjournment.

The four defendants and counsel had entered the court room, shortly followed by the court rising as the Recorder of London, Sir Gerald Dodson, entered.<sup>1</sup> The Clerk of the Court<sup>2</sup> read the plea:

Helen Duncan, Ernest Edward Hartland Homer, Elizabeth Anne Jones, and Frances Brown, you four are charged upon an indictment which contains seven counts.

In the *first count* that between the 1st December, 1943, and the 19th January, 1944, you conspired together and with other persons unknown to pretend to



Ernest Homer

exercise or use a kind of conjuration, to wit, that through the agency of the said Helen Duncan spirits of deceased persons should appear to be present in fact in such place as the said Helen Duncan was then in, and that the said spirits were communicating with living persons then and there present, contrary to section 4 of The Witchcraft Act, 1735.



Helen Duncan

In the *second count* you are all four charged that on the 19th January of this year you pretended to exercise or use a kind of conjuration, namely, that spirits of deceased persons should be present in fact in the place where Helen Duncan then was, contrary to section 4 of The Witchcraft Act, 1735.

<sup>1</sup> Dr David Saunders, PhD, MSc, BSc (Hons), FHEA, PGCAP. University of Northampton

<sup>2</sup> Rachel Evenden, Lecturer in Positive Psychology (MBPsS, BSc Psychology). University of Northampton



In the *third count* you are charged that upon the same day, 19th January of this year, you with intent to defraud caused Stanley Raymond Worth to pay 25s. to Ernest Homer (that is, the said Ernest Edward Hartland Homer) for the use or benefit of yourselves by false pretences, the pretence being that you were then in a position to bring about the appearance of the spirits of deceased persons and that you then bona fide intended so to do without trickery.

In the *fourth count* you are charged with a similar offence upon the 19th January of this year in respect of causing Bessie Lock to pay 7s. to Ernest Homer for the use or benefit of yourselves upon the same false pretences with intent to defraud.

In the last *three counts* you are charged with effecting a public mischief, in each count upon the following dates respectively, namely, the 14<sup>th</sup> day of January, the 17<sup>th</sup> day of January, and the 19<sup>th</sup> day of January of this year, the particulars being that you effected that public mischief by holding a meeting to which His Majesty's liege subjects were admitted on payment, and at which meeting the said Helen Duncan professed that the spirit of a deceased person was in fact present and visible through her agency. Those particulars are the same in each of those last three counts.

Helen Duncan, are you guilty or not guilty?

PRISONER DUNCAN: Not guilty.<sup>3</sup>

THE CLERK OF THE COURT: Ernest Edward Hartland Homer?

PRISONER HOMER: Not guilty.<sup>4</sup>

THE CLERK OF THE COURT: Elizabeth Anne Jones?

PRISONER JONES: Not guilty.<sup>5</sup>

THE CLERK OF THE COURT: Frances

Brown? PRISONER BROWN: Not guilty.<sup>6</sup>



### PRISONER'S DOCK



<sup>3</sup> Tanya Smith, General Manager of the Arthur Findlay College (AFC)

<sup>4</sup> Torsten Nyquist

<sup>5</sup> Sandie Baker, AFC Tutor

<sup>6</sup> Lynn Cottrell, AFC Tutor

The prosecution was played by Paul Gaunt; in the opening address it was stated:



May it please your Lordship, members of the jury: I appear with my learned friend Mr. Elam to prosecute these four persons. We appear for the Crown, and my learned friends Mr. Loseby and Mr. Simpson Pedler appear together for all four prisoners.

I daresay you noticed that when the indictment was read out the Witchcraft Act was mentioned; you may have heard that. I want to make it abundantly clear at the very commencement of this prosecution that this is in no way connected with witchcraft; it is in no way aimed at the honest beliefs, whatever they may be, of any man or woman. What it is aimed at is something quite different.

It is aimed at just ordinary common fraud.

In the first two counts of this indictment you will find that the Witchcraft Act has been used; it is an old Act, it is two hundred years old, and in this particular case the Act has remained in the Statute Book untouched since the reign of George II, and you may think for a very good reason indeed.

In olden days, that is to say, in the times of our forefathers, yours and mine, it was almost a popular matter to chase poor deluded creatures who were thought to be witches, and the mass of the public believed in that sort of thing being possible.

Witchcraft was not the only means known in those times of playing upon the imagination of the public. There was sorcery, enchantment, spells, and one particular thing which was called conjuration, that is to say, conjuring up spirits: but times changed and our forefathers began to think it was all nonsense, and that it was ridiculous to prosecute people for practising something which was utterly impossible, and, when the reign of George II was reached, the law was altered to say that people were not to be prosecuted for witchcraft.

Therefore the Act of 1736 says this: "From and after the 24<sup>th</sup> day of June no prosecution, suit or proceedings shall be commenced or carried on against any person or persons for witchcraft, sorcery, enchantment or conjuration in any court whatsoever in Great Britain"; so that stopped that, and everybody thought that that had been packed up. The Act also says: "And for the more effectual preventing and punishing any pretences to such, arts as are before mentioned . . . being lawfully convicted on indictment, shall, for every such offence suffer imprisonment"—that, of course, means 'may'. It would be a matter in the discretion of the judge; it does not mean that they have to go to prison.

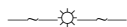
So we reach a position in 1735 which would no doubt be welcomed by any person who may call himself to-day a Spiritualist.

The other matters in this indictment that do not concern the Witchcraft Act, are allegations that these persons caused money to be paid by false pretences, that is to say, the false pretence that I have already indicated to you and which you have heard in the indictment: that Helen Duncan was in a position to bring about the appearance of the spirits of the dead, and the false pretence that they intended to do that bona fide without any trickery.



And that, in the allegation of the Crown, led to the payment of monies by persons for admission to such entertainment. Perhaps ‘entertainment’ is the wrong word—exhibition.

Finally it is alleged by the Crown here that such behaviour—not necessarily particularly at this time when the dead are no doubt anxiously sought after by persons who have lost their boys—that such conduct as pretending to call them up when it is a false and hollow lie, is nothing more than a public mischief.



After the primary opening the court called the Crown prosecution witness, Stanley Raymond Worth.<sup>7</sup> Stanley Worth was a lieutenant in the R.N.V.R. It would be his account that would form the basis of the prosecution, although he initially claimed to be an honest researcher into Spiritualism; on meeting Helen Duncan he soon decided she was a fraud and reported her to the police. On police instructions, he would attend meetings, reporting back to the Portsmouth police, establishing that monies were paid for materialisation séances.

On January 19th 1944 Worth also purchased a séance ticket for 12s. 6d. for War Reserve police officer Thomas Cross<sup>8</sup>. As the third materialisation was taking place Cross rushed forward from the second row, knocking Mr Homer to the ground. From his chair he claimed to seize the form with the aid of Stanley Worth shining a torch, both claiming in the evidence box that the spirit form was in fact Helen Duncan holding a white sheet!



**Clerk of the Court**



**Dorothy Constance Gill**

However, defence witness Dorothy Constance Gill<sup>9</sup> claimed this account to be false inasmuch as the form Cross claimed was indeed Helen Duncan was in fact ectoplasm, and Duncan was sitting where she was supposed to be in her chair. She stated that in fact Cross fell through the curtains, sprawled across Duncan and the ectoplasm had gone, not snatched away by somebody in the audience as claimed by the prosecution.



**Defence**

<sup>7</sup> Professor Chris A. Roe Perrott-Warrick, Senior Researcher Director, Centre for the Study of Anomalous Psychological Processes. University of Northampton

<sup>8</sup> Darren Hart, an AFC student and professional actor.

<sup>9</sup> Janette (Jan) Marshall, AFC tutor.

*It was this debate between counsel that the re-enactment was centred around by the defence and prosecution.*



Defence and prosecution arguing the claims of Stanley Raymond Worth



The full re-enactment was as far as possible taken from the trial transcripts which were put together, thus giving a unique insight into the actual proceedings of the trial. Many had not realised the facts of the trial, such as that Helen Duncan did not sit at the dock alone but there were three other co-defendants charged on the same seven counts in the High Court. Naturally, there was some editing but nothing was changed, added, or removed to change the balanced overview of this extraordinary trial.

Mr. John Maude, K.C., and Mr. Henry Elam appeared on behalf of the prosecution and Mr. C. E. Loseby and Mr. J. Simpson Pedler appeared on behalf of the defence. For the purpose of the re-enactment there was just the defence and prosecution.

### Prosecution witness Thomas Cross







**Thomas Cross's testimony is challenged by the defence**



**Defence witness Dorothy Constance Gill leaving the witness box**

*The trial started on Thursday March 23rd 1944  
and closed with the verdict on the seventh day,  
Friday March 31st 1944.*

*The jury retired to consider their verdict at 4.32  
pm and returned into court at 4.56 p.m.:*

THE CLERK OF THE COURT: Members of the jury, are  
you agreed upon your verdict?

THE FOREMAN OF THE JURY:<sup>10</sup>

Yes, sir.

THE CLERK OF THE COURT: Do you find the prisoner Helen Duncan guilty or not  
guilty on the first count of this Indictment for conspiracy to contravene the Witchcraft  
Act?

THE FOREMAN: Guilty, sir.

THE CLERK OF THE COURT: Do you find the prisoner Ernest Edward Hartland  
Homer guilty or not guilty on that count?

THE FOREMAN: Guilty.

THE CLERK OF THE COURT: Do you find the prisoner Elizabeth Anne Jones guilty  
or not guilty on that count?

THE FOREMAN: Guilty.

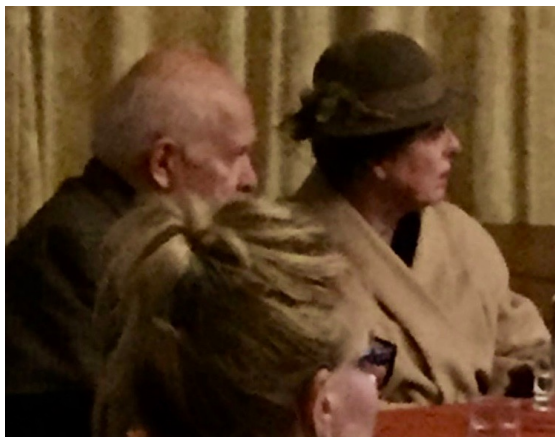
THE CLERK OF THE COURT: Do you find the prisoner Frances Brown guilty or not  
guilty on that count?

THE FOREMAN: Guilty.

THE CLERK OF THE COURT: You find all four guilty on the first count,- and that is  
the verdict of you all?

THE FOREMAN: Yes.

THE CLERK OF THE COURT: You are discharged from giving a verdict on the other  
counts.



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<sup>10</sup> Benny Illemaann



On day eight, Monday April 3rd 1944, sentencing was passed:

## SENTENCES

THE RECORDER: Helen Duncan, Ernest Homer, Elizabeth Jones and Frances Brown, you have been found guilty of conspiring together to commit an unlawful act, namely, of pretending to recall spirits of deceased persons in a visible and tangible form; the emphasis, of course, is upon the word “pretending”. Whether genuine manifestations of the kind are possible, the verdict of the jury here does not decide, and this court has nothing whatever to do with any such abstract questions. The jury found that the methods adopted by you in the exhibitions covered by the charge amounted to a fraud upon those who witnessed them.

It has been argued that the Statute of 1735, which makes false pretending an offence, is old and out of date, but fraud existed long before that Statute was passed and has prevailed in one form or another ever since. It was also suggested that Mrs. Duncan should be allowed to give a demonstration of her powers. Well, as I have said already, if this had taken place and nothing had appeared, Mrs. Duncan would have been condemned even before she had been tried. It would have been in effect a reversion to the dark ages, and to something very akin to trial by ordeal. It was not a question of Mrs. Duncan taking the risk; it was a question of her being tried according to the laws of the land, and there was nothing in this Prosecution directed against Spiritualism as such; and all those who may believe in genuine manifestations of a spiritual kind will, I imagine, welcome the expulsion of fraud from any of its observances. In law there is no uncertainty at all about the position of Spiritualists, among whom there are many sincere and devout persons. They are free to go their own way, and they are only responsible to the law when fraudulent practices are proved. In this respect they are no different from any other section of the community.

In this case the jury appeared to have little hesitation in finding that all of you had participated in a common fraud, and I must deal with the case upon that footing. There are many people, especially in War-time, sorrowing for loved ones. There is a great danger of their susceptibilities being exploited, and out of this yearning for comfort and assurance there are those unfortunately who are ready to profit. Many of those persons who seek that solace are trusting by nature and poor in circumstances, and the law endeavours to protect such persons against themselves. Now in this case Mrs. Duncan made £112 in six days, which is some indication of how willing people are to dabble in the occult. That being so,



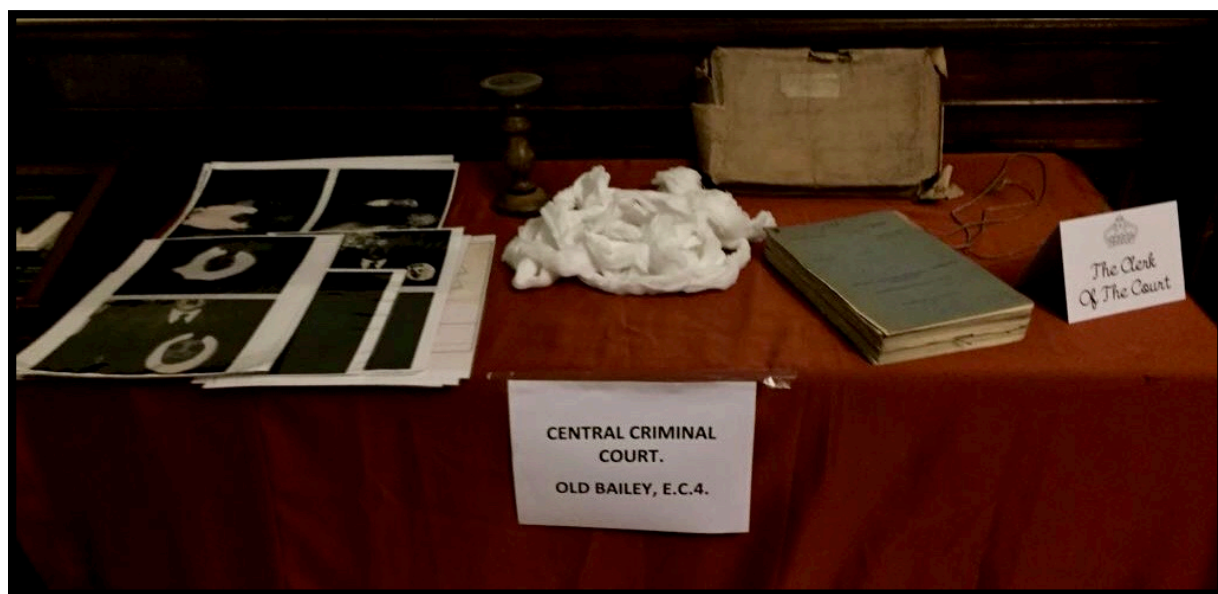
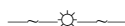
it is highly important in the interests of the community as a whole that these demonstrations should be conducted without fraud.

I have considered very anxiously the course that I should take, and I have come to the conclusion that, as the jury have found this to be a case of plain dishonesty, I can make no distinction between the accused and others who are similarly convicted. In the case of Mrs. Duncan, she has made the most out of this, and the sentence of the Court upon her is that she be imprisoned for nine months.

So far as you, Frances Brown, are concerned, it is a long time ago since you were convicted of shoplifting, and I dismiss that from my mind altogether. It is quite plain that you took an active part in this, particularly by the exhibition of these photographs. But you were active in trying to impress upon them the genuineness of these exhibitions by the handling of these photographs. The matter cannot be therefore passed over in your case without there being some penalty, but I make it as lenient as I can, and the sentence of the court upon you will be one of four months' imprisonment.

So far as you, Ernest Homer, and you, Elizabeth Jones, are concerned, I think you are in a somewhat different position, both of you. I think it may well be that, like other people, you engaged Helen Duncan, and it may well be that your enthusiasm for what you may believe led you to close your eyes to what was going on. You both of you have good characters, and under those circumstances I do not think it is necessary to pass any sentence of imprisonment upon either of you, but I trust in future you will be on your guard against those who are only too ready to make money at the expense of credulous people. I am willing to believe that you belong to that class, although it is not a matter which can be regarded as altogether a matter without doubt. However, I am going to give you the benefit of that doubt, having regard to all the circumstances of the case, and particularly with regard to your good character hitherto, and I trust you will guard against such a situation in future to the utmost of your power.

In those circumstances you will both be bound over to be of good behaviour for a period of two years in your own recognizances in the sum of £5, which means you will hear no more about this if you behave yourselves and keep out of trouble; otherwise consequences are apt to follow, you understand.



Items shown above are copies of evidence used by the prosecution in the trial, which consisted of Frances Brown's psychic photographs, the séance seating plan for January 19th 1944 when Helen Duncan was seized, and some cheesecloth/butter-muslin.

Also on the table are part of the original typed trial notes which belonged to the SNU defence, Charles Loseby.



*An overview of the re-enactment showing the defence seated, the Recorder at the bench, witness Lieutenant Stanley Worth, the prosecution in cross-examination and the Clerk of the Court seated with the items of evidence behind her.*

Helen Duncan, after a failed appeal on Monday 19th June 1944, was released from HM Prison Holloway on Friday September 22nd 1944 after serving 172 days of her nine-month sentence

Pioneer has previously published the problems with mediumship and the Vagrancy Act - Helen Duncan being the first and only Spiritualist medium to be sent to prison under the clause from the Witchcraft Act. Please see Pioneer from Vol. II, No. I in six parts: "The Effect of the Vagrancy Act – The Work of the Spiritualists' National Union."

*Thanks are due to all those who played the characters, my wife Cindy for her many hours of help with the script, and the staff at the Arthur Findlay College for making this historic event such a success. Thanks are also due to Janette (Jan) Marshall for taking all these wonderful photographs of the trial re-enactment of Helen Duncan and her co-defendants.*

