

BOOK REVIEWS

THE ENIGMA OF DANIEL HOME by Trevor H. Hall. Prometheus Books, Buffalo, N.Y., 1984. 148 pp.

No one can accuse Prometheus Books of lacking an editorial point of view. Perhaps I should say *two* points of view: the one it professes and the rather different one it often betrays. Recently, Prometheus has published two books on the heyday of spiritualism which are anything but models of tough-minded objectivity. They display not just antipathy toward the evidence for paranormal phenomena, but also a disturbing paucity of clear reasoning and accurate or relevant detail. The first is Ruth Brandon's *The Spiritualists*, which Brian Inglis¹ justifiably criticized in the pages of this *Journal*. The second is the book under review. Its subtitle is 'Medium or Fraud?', and beneath that the dust jacket reads 'The mystery of Britain's most famous spiritualist unraveled'. Unfortunately, nothing of the sort occurs. Indeed, Trevor Hall's new book is little more than a profusion of hearsay, innuendo, irrelevant detail, and fallacious arguments.

Undoubtedly, Hall's book will seem impressive to those who are unfamiliar with the case of Home, and who will accordingly be dazzled by the apparent breadth and depth of his scholarship. What they won't know is that Hall completely ignores evidence tending to undermine his unfavorable appraisal of the case, and that his mastery of the material is confined largely to irrelevant

detail. In fact, Hall's book is simply the latest in a long line of works about parapsychology in general and physical phenomena in particular, whose persuasiveness rests entirely on certain traditional questionable tactics. Hall's favorites, evidently, are: (a) to generate suspicion about Home's character in order to cast doubt on the genuineness of his phenomena, and (b) to focus only on the weakest cases, while ignoring those in which the evidence is strongest and in which consideration of Home's personality or character is clearly irrelevant.

Hall's first two chapters, for example, are intended mainly to establish Home's vanity. His principal concern is to demonstrate that Home added his middle name 'Dunglas' and claimed falsely to be a descendant of the Earls of Home. But the suspicion about Home's name, and the allegations of vanity, are old issues; and they are also quite irrelevant to the question of whether Home's phenomena were genuine. Moreover, one cannot take Hall's historical evidence at face value. Hall maintains that Home invented an aristocratic background to insure social success. But one of his pivotal pieces of evidence is testimony from Sir David Brewster, who might well have been confused on the matter, and in any case whose lies concerning Home are well documented. In fact, Hall suggests (on the incredibly weak basis of Brewster's scientific credentials) that Brewster was a reliable witness, and never bothers to mention how Brewster's daughter unwittingly exposed her father's dishonesty.² Besides, it might well be that Home simply didn't need a fictitious aristocratic history in order to find a niche for himself among the European upper class. Assuming his phenomena were genuine, and his demeanor sufficiently endearing, he would have been special enough to command their attention and affection. In any case, the topic of Home's character is a blatant red herring. Even if Home did invent a middle name and an aristocratic background for himself, and even if he was fickle and opportunistic, he may still have produced genuine phenomena.

In chapter 2 Hall purports to give some of the history of spiritualism, but omits relevant details. He briefly tells the story of the Fox sisters, and mentions Margaret's confession of fraud. But he fails to discuss the circumstances surrounding her confession, and the reasons for thinking that it may have been spurious. The history of mediumship, in fact, has a curious sub-history of apparent pseudo-confessions, none of which Hall bothers to discuss.

In fact, chapter 2 is peppered with such convenient lacunae. On p. 29, Hall claims that Home left his aunt's house to 'seek his fortune in the world of spiritualism'. But he fails to mention that his aunt apparently found physical phenomena religiously repugnant, and that after some unsuccessful exorcisms intended to stem the rising tide of phenomena occurring in her house, she threw Daniel out. He also fails to note that Home had apparently hoped to become a physician, that one of his benefactors even sent him to school for that purpose, and that his poor health interfered with his studies. Moreover, Hall offers no evidence in support of his contention that Home claimed aristocratic descent when starting out in America as a medium. His crucial testimony from Brewster dates from a later period. On p. 31 Hall mentions the sitting at the house of Rufus Elmer, but ignores the interesting evidence for the phenomena apparently produced on that occasion. On p. 32 he claims, without supporting evidence, that Home moved to England because spiritualism had ended its 'epidemic' phase in America. Not only is there no evidence I'm aware of to support that

claim, but Hall mentions only as an afterthought that Home moved to England on the advice of his physician.

Chapter 3 deals with the famous ‘mystery of iniquity’ surrounding Home. Hall counters Dingwall’s suggestion that the mystery concerned Home’s homosexuality, and offers in its place allegations concerning Home’s failure to pay for a fur coat. Quite apart from the fact that the chapter amounts to little more than a compilation of gossip about a famous nineteenth-century figure, the speculations about Home’s moral failings are once again irrelevant to the question of whether his phenomena were genuine. One might also wonder about the accuracy of Hall’s account of Home’s interactions with Robert and Elizabeth Browning. I encourage the curious to compare it to the more detailed (but more turgid) account provided by Jenkins (*op. cit.*).

Chapter 4, which purports to review Home’s phenomena, is egregiously bad. Hall suggests that Home’s success can be attributed to a combination of conjuring and the power of suggestion. Once again, the uninformed are likely to find the discussion impressive, since Hall cites the well-known studies of Besterman, Hodgson and Davey, and mentions several of the ways Besterman and Davey fooled sitters in bogus séances. But he fails to mention the equally well-known fact that their phenomena differed in significant ways from the best of those reported in connection with Home—for example, that Home often produced large-scale phenomena, on the spur of the moment, in locations never before visited, with objects supplied by the sitters, in good light, and with opportunity to examine the phenomena closely while in progress. He also fails to explain how Home might have been able to practice such conjuring and suggestion under those conditions for nearly 25 years without being detected in trickery (Hall does mention two—and only two—alleged exposures; I’ll comment on them in a moment). And of course, he says nothing about the very best pieces of evidence, such as Crookes’ accordion-in-a-cage test, and spring-balance experiments.³ Instead, Hall cites reports of how other mediums of the period cheated. But he gives no evidence that Home may have been guilty of the same tricks.

Had Hall wanted to give the case of Home a genuinely scholarly and fair appraisal, he would have mentioned and responded to the arsenal of familiar arguments designed to show that deception and suggestion cannot account for many of Home’s phenomena. At the very least he could have cited the famous paper by Perovsky-Petrovo-Solovovo⁴ (hardly one of the more credulous of the early S.P.R. members), dismissing the hypothesis of suggestion. What Hall gives us instead is a version of the tired argument from human bias, claiming that Home successfully manipulated sitters’ beliefs in occult phenomena. Of course, the argument from human bias is a double-edged sword. If biases in favor of psi phenomena may lead one to malobserve or mis-report, so may biases against psi phenomena. Under the circumstances, then, it is inadvisable to quote Dingwall’s report (pp. 45–46) that he failed to observe phenomena apparently experienced by others at a séance. (In fact, negative biases seem to explain the regrettable behavior of David Brewster—not to mention Hall’s own mishandling of the evidence.) It seems to me that there is no longer any excuse for perpetuating the old myth that only the biases of ‘believers’ undermine claims regarding the paranormal. The defects of that position are by now so well-known, that it is

irresponsible to take that stand and make no effort whatsoever to address the familiar arguments against it.

The accusations of fraud cited by Hall ('considered' would be too strong a term) are those of Messrs. Morio (the so-called Barthez exposure) and Merrifield. Quite apart from the fact that Hall was apparently unable to dredge up more than two mere allegations concerning nearly a quarter-century's worth of mediumship, he makes no mention of Zorab's examinations of both sets of allegations.⁵ Zorab's more detailed and penetrating discussion demonstrates that the cases are far more complex than Hall suggests, and that there are good reasons for thinking that Home was guilty of no fraud at all. Furthermore, although Hall cites Perovsky-Petrovo-Solovovo's paper as his source for the Morio accusation (p. 48), he conveniently fails to mention the author's reluctant conclusion that the evidence seems only to have been second- or third-hand. Nevertheless, Hall will undoubtedly mislead many readers simply in virtue of including that citation in the text. It creates the false impression that his examination of the evidence is scholarly and thorough. And although in fact there is no good evidence that Home was ever guilty of fraud, Hall will probably deceive many readers into thinking that damaging testimony was suppressed.

But the nadir of chapter 4 is when Hall argues that Home should be considered a fraud in virtue of his association with the medium Frank Herne. He writes, 'It seems to me axiomatic that the honesty of a medium may be judged by his or her associates' (p. 49). It is easy to demonstrate the flaws in this position, even if we grant Hall his assumption that Herne was a total fraud. I question whether that assumption is defensible; like many mediums, Herne may have been a partial fraud. Nevertheless, Hall must explain a great deal in order to defend his charge against Home.

Obviously, whether or not Home's association with Herne is suspicious depends on the nature of and reason(s) for the association. Some associations (even intimate associations) with dishonest persons confer no guilt whatsoever; indeed, they might be quite innocent. But Hall tells us virtually nothing about the nature of Home's relationship with Herne. In fact, he mentions only that the men attended one séance together, and that Home apparently promised to give another séance with Herne. Now first of all, this constitutes no evidence that the two mediums had any relationship worth mentioning. But in any case, prominent spiritualists were likely to have known one another and to have met at séances, independently of their varying degrees of competence and honesty, or their differing motives. Hence, it was inevitable that Home would know the other prominent mediums of his day; it would have been in his interest to do so whether or not he or they were frauds.

To support Hall's charge, one must first show that Home *knew* Herne to be a fraud, and then demonstrate that the two were in collusion. But Hall does nothing of the kind. Nor does he evaluate competing (and possibly more reasonable) accounts of the relationship between Home and Herne. For example, Home's interest in Herne (even in Herne's dishonesty) could have been part of an interest in protecting the image of spiritualism, or (more cynically) in preserving his own pre-eminence among mediums. After all, Home insisted that other mediums should not be trusted. Hall's analysis here, as elsewhere, is intolerably superficial.

In chapters 5 and 6 Hall studies the circumstances surrounding the writing and publication of *Experiences in Spiritualism*. He argues that the book was actually written in 1869 (not 1870), and that attribution of the book should properly be made to the third Earl of Dunraven, not Lord Adare, the fourth Earl (despite the fact that most of the book consists of Adare's letters to his father).

Hall presents interesting evidence suggesting that the third Earl published and later withdrew the book from circulation, and that he not only contributed to its contents but also amended and corrected the text. It is less clear, however, that this supports Hall's claim that the book's attribution should be to the third Earl, or that his role in the conception and preparation of the book was 'dominant' (p. 78). Hall offers no evidence that the third Earl made any significant alteration in the text, and the fact remains that most of the work was written by his son. Moreover, although the third Earl may well have prodded Adare to provide the material, publishers similarly push their authors to produce, without thereby earning credit for the work.

Interestingly, this discussion is one of the few times Hall makes a genuine attempt to understand the people about whom he is writing. He considers the religious background of the third Earl and its impact on Adare, and seeks clues therein for the publication and later withdrawal of *Experiences*. But just as Hall previously glossed over the allegedly critical relationship between Home and Herne, he continues, in chapter 7, to skim the surface of personalities and relationships that could make a real difference to his case against Home.

Chapter 7 concerns, among other things, the notorious affair between Home and Jane Lyon. Once again Hall succumbs to the bibliographical myopia that apparently afflicts only the discussions of evidence that might prove unfavorable to his case. And in contrast to his meticulousness and attention to dates regarding the publication of *Experiences in Spiritualism*, Hall makes no effort to discuss details of the interaction between Home and Mrs. Lyon. For example, he conveniently avoids discussion of events occurring during the 10 months between their initial encounter and the time Mrs. Lyon filed her affidavits against Home. In fact, Hall makes no effort at all to examine the character of Mrs. Lyon. Regarding her testimony at the trial, he says only that it was 'not impressive' (p. 90), avoiding any discussion of the grounds for thinking she committed perjury, much less the abysmal reasoning leading to the court's decision against Home. Moreover, if Jenkins' account is accurate, Mrs. Lyon was, as a rule, far from reliable and trustworthy; indeed, she seems to have been unstable, opportunistic, and somewhat ruthless. At the very least, her relationship with Home was undoubtedly far more complex than Hall suggests. On the basis of Hall's account, however, one would never suspect that Mrs. Lyon even had a personality.

In the remainder of the book Hall once again purports to discuss Home's phenomena. But he continues to ignore the cases that most strongly suggest the phenomena were genuine. Chapter 8 is entitled 'The Last Seances', but deals in fact with the relationship between Lord Adare's impending marriage and the haste with which *Experiences in Spiritualism* seems to have been published. Chapter 9 concerns the alleged levitation out the window at Ashley House. Skeptics frequently focus on this case, as if it really mattered in the total evaluation of Home's phenomena. But in fact, the séance in question is one of the

most poorly documented in the entire literature on Home. I find it inexcusable that Hall should devote nearly one-fourth of his book to this case, and say nothing about Crookes' detailed work with Home, or about other studies conducted under better conditions and documented with greater care. Home produced nearly a quarter-century's worth of phenomena to speculate about, a great deal of that under conditions allowing for reasonable evaluation. Readers will look in vain for any mention of those cases in Hall's book.

Curiously, Hall defends his discussion of the Ashley House case by arguing that most séances with Home 'were social occasions in entirely uncontrolled conditions, for which the evidence is largely anecdotal' (p. 105), and that by contrast the testimony of Adare and Lindsay was more careful and detailed. Now first of all, even if that claim about Adare and Lindsay were true, the Ashley House case remains one of the poorest of the lot. I submit that if Hall had really wanted to evaluate the best evidence, he would have focused on other cases. But of course, if he were really interested in the best evidence, he would have bypassed the testimony of Adare and Lindsay altogether, and turned his attention to the rich vein of well-documented accounts of Home's phenomena.

On p. 111, Hall reintroduces his charge that Home generally used suggestion of some kind to influence sitters, in order to elicit concordant experiences or testimony regarding his phenomena. And once more Hall fails to mention the array of arguments demonstrating the inadequacy of that position. He also focuses on cases for which the hypothesis of suggestion has some plausibility (especially when not compared with those for which it has no plausibility), and discusses none of the cases for which it is manifestly inadequate. For example, Hall quotes passages from *Experiences in Spiritualism* to support the claim that Adare was subject to Home's power of suggestion. The implication is that all reports of Home's phenomena may similarly be explained by suggestion. But Hall fails to mention important differences between the incidents he cites and the best pieces of evidence (in which, for example, Home neither moved nor spoke prior to the occurrence of phenomena, or in which Home's relationship to the sitters was far less intimate than it was in the case of Adare, and perhaps—as some interpretations have it—less pathological as well). Moreover, it is a large—and unjustified—leap from the hypothesis of individual suggestion to that of group suggestion, and also highly implausible to suppose that Home was capable of mesmerizing groups of sitters for nearly 25 years without slipping up once.

Needless to say, I do not recommend this book. In my opinion, Hall displays an appalling disregard for the canons of historical research. Moreover, what little the reader may learn about Home and his phenomena (and it is little indeed) is irrelevant to Hall's professed aim of determining whether the phenomena were genuinely paranormal. Nevertheless, I suppose Hall and Prometheus have succeeded in performing a minor service to the field. They have demonstrated once again that the enemies of serious psychical research sometimes masquerade as champions of dispassionate inquiry and metaphysical sobriety.

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NOTES

1. *JSPR*, **52** (1983): 209–12.
2. For details concerning Brewster's behavior, see, e.g., M. Gordon, *The Home Life of Sir David Brewster* (Edinburgh: Edmonston & Douglas, 1869); D. D. Home, *Incidents in My Life* (Secaucus, N. J.: University Books, 1972); B. Inglis, *Natural and Supernatural* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1977); E. Jenkins, *The Shadow and the Light: A Defence of Daniel Dunglas Home the Medium* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1982).
3. Readers unfamiliar with this evidence are directed to R. G. Medhurst, *et al*, *Crookes and the Spirit World* (New York: Taplinger, 1972).
4. 'The Hallucination Theory as Applied to Certain Cases of Physical Phenomena', *PSPR*, **21** (1909): 436–82. For additional objections to the suggestion hypothesis, see J. Beloff, 'Historical Overview' in B. B. Wolman (ed.) *Handbook of Parapsychology* (New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold, 1977), and S. Braude 'A Fresh Look at Physical Mediumship', *Psi News* **4**, no. 2 (1981).
5. 'Were D. D. Home's "Spirit Hands" Ever Fraudently Produced?' *JSPR*, **46** (1971): 228–35; *D. D. Home the Medium: A Biography and a Vindication*. Unpublished in English; published in Italian as *D. D. Home, il Medium* (Milano: Armenia Editore, 1976); revised and published in Dutch as *D. D. Home, het krachtigste medium aller tijden . . .* (Den Haag: Uitgeverij Leopold, 1980).
6. 'On the Alleged Exposure of D. D. Home in France', *JSPR*, **15** (1912): 274–88.