

**Contemporary Physical Mediumship:
Is it Part of a Continuous Tradition?
Jack Hunter**

“It is prodigiously strange, prodigiously unusual, and it would seem so unlikely as to be incredible; but we must give in to the facts...Yes, it is absurd; but no matter – it is true.”

– Prof. Charles Richet on Ectoplasm

To many, physical mediumship seances are a social phenomenon relegated to the history books: rising to prominence in the mid-nineteenth century and eventually petering out amidst high profile exposures of fraud in the first decades of the twentieth century. In recent years, however, physical mediumship has made something of a comeback with new circles working towards the manifestation of physical phenomena being established in private homes across the UK, Europe and the United States. This resurgence has been facilitated by the development of internet forums promoting the subject, enabling private circles to disseminate their experiences and to exchange tips and procedures for the production of physical phenomena. This paper will aim to explore the issue of whether the forms of physical mediumship popular today are part of a continuous tradition beginning in the nineteenth century, or essentially modern phenomena with roots in the 1990s. The main point of the discussion will be to ascertain the extent to which the phenomena of contemporary physical mediumship resemble those documented in the early literature of psychical research.

Jon Klimo provides a fairly standard definition of physical mediumship as the purported ability of certain mediums to “channel unknown energies that affect the physical environment in ways that can be directly experienced by persons other than the channel” (Klimo 1987: 200). Manifestations of these “unknown energies” can take a variety of different forms including: the levitation and manipulation of physical objects (such as knocks and raps, table levitations etc); the production of anomalous environmental changes (such as breezes and unusual drops in room temperature); the generation of so-called “spirit-lights”; the “apportation” of physical objects into and out of the seance room, and the materialization of ectoplasmic forms (manifestations of limbs, heads or, occasionally, whole bodies),

amongst others (Braude 1997). Such phenomena are, by their very physical nature, particularly controversial even within the parapsychological community. Nevertheless, there is an extremely large body of literature composed by highly credible observers that seems to support the idea that certain mediums have, even under strictly controlled conditions, been able to produce these strange phenomena (Braude 1997: 23-48; Tynn n.d: 1; McLuhan 2010; Haule 2011: 122-125). Although the main focus of this paper does not require these phenomena to be genuine, as it will be primarily concerned with the “culture of physical mediumship” which undoubtedly exists regardless of whether or not its phenomena are ontologically real, it is both interesting and important to note that apparently good evidence does exist to suggest that such phenomena may be possible in the presence of particularly gifted mediums.

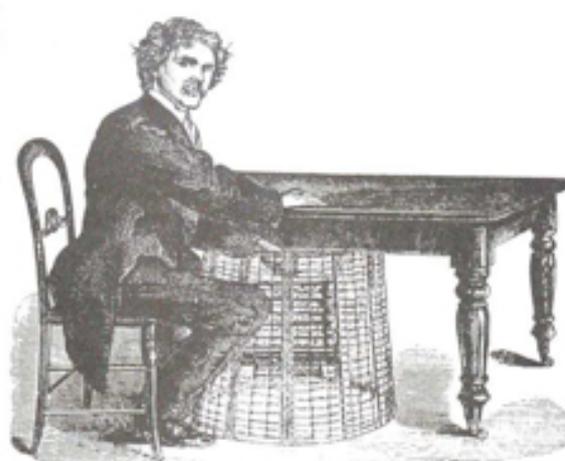
The Spiritualist movement itself was founded upon physical phenomena. In the small town of Hydesville, New York State, in 1848 the Fox family was plagued by anomalous raps and knocks that seemed, once a practical code for communication had been devised, to demonstrate the continued spiritual existence of a deceased peddler by the name of Charles B. Rosma, who had allegedly been murdered in the house some years previously (Doyle 2006 [1926]; Moreman 2010: 161). This example of what would later be termed physical mediumship was



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found to be focussed around the three Fox children and spawned a movement which spread rapidly across the United States and Europe, and which still persists today. The Fox sisters, Leah (1814-1890), Kate (1837-1892) and Margaret (1833-1893), became the first physical mediums and toured all over the United States giving demonstrations of their ability to produce anomalous knocks through which ostensible spirits were able to communicate. As the Fox sisters toured, new mediums began to appear in their wake, and with them came an increasingly varied array of different spiritual manifestations: from mental mediumship and deep-trance communication to the materialization of spirit forms (Moreman 2010: 161).

Perhaps the most influential innovator in early physical mediumship was the Scottish-born Daniel Dunglas Home (1833-1886). After an early life allegedly filled with spiritual visions and premonitions, and coming from a long line of Scottish seers, Home conducted his first seance at the age of eighteen and swiftly gained a reputation as a powerful medium. By 1856 Home was conducting seances in Britain. In 1868 he performed his most famous paranormal feat -- the levitation of his body



horizontally out through a third-story window at Ashley House in London. This event was apparently witnessed by Lord Lindsay, Lord Adare and Captain Charles Wynne, all men of high repute and considered at the time to be honest in what they described (Doyle 2006 [1926]: 99; Lamont 2006: 185-187). In 1874 Home's mediumship received further support with the publication of Sir William Crookes' report which seemed to confirm, after laboratory experimentation, that Home did indeed possess the ability to manipulate physical objects by paranormal means. Using specially designed laboratory equipment Crookes tested Home's ability to change the weight of physical objects and to play tunes on an accordion suspended out of reach in a cage (Lamont 2005: 204-207; Alvarado 2006: 142; Melechi 2008: 198-200). Home's seances also often featured the alleged materialization of glowing hands that would mischievously touch the sitters, though he never produced full-body materializations (Doyle 2006 [1926]: 106). Arthur Conan Doyle considered Home to be something of a virtuoso medium in that he was proficient in four different forms of mediumship: the direct voice (whereby spirits communicate verbally independent of the medium), trance mediumship (whereby spirits communicate verbally through the body of the medium), clairvoyance (the ability to see visions of the spirit world, the future and distant locations) and physical mediumship (the ability to psychically manipulate physical objects) (Doyle 2006 [1926]: 106). Although accusations of fraud were made, Home was never actually caught cheating (Moreman 2010: 164-165).

The substance known as "ectoplasm" is by now practically synonymous with physical mediumship and is well documented in the early literature of

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psychical research. The term itself was first coined in 1894 by the Nobel prize winning physiologist Prof. Charles Richet (1850-1935) in reference to observations of anomalous limbs during experiments with the medium Eusapia Paladino (1854-1918). Writing a little later, in his book “Clairvoyance and Materialization: A Record of Experiments” (2006 [1927]), the psychical researcher Dr. Gustav Geley (1868-1924) provides a good description of this mysterious substance:

“During trance a portion of [the medium’s] organism is externalised. This portion is sometimes very small, sometimes very considerable... Observation shows this ectoplasm as an amorphous substance which may be either solid or vaporous. Then, usually very soon, the formless substance becomes organic, it condenses, and forms appear, which, when the process is complete, have all the anatomical and physiological characters of biologic life. The ectoplasm has become a living being or a fractional part of a living being, but is always closely connected to the body of the medium, of which it is a kind of prolongation, and into which it is absorbed at the end of the experiment” (Geley 2006[1927]: 176)

Ectoplasm quickly became an essential component of any good Spiritualist seance. Some of the most intensive studies of ectoplasmic phenomena were conducted with the medium Eva C. (1886-19??) under the supervision of Baron Albert von Schrenck-Notzing (1862-1929), and were published in the book “Materialisation Phenomena” in 1914, complete with numerous photographic plates. During seances with Eva C. the ectoplasmic substance, which Schrenck-Notzing termed “teleplasm” (Brower 2010: 117), would be exuded from the medium’s mouth, breasts, navel, fingertips, vagina and scalp. This substance was described as coalescing into crude limbs, referred to as “pseudo-pods,” and human-like heads which would move independently and were particularly sensitive to light and touch. These materialisations would later dissolve or be absorbed back into the medium’s body (Sommer 2009: 304). Eva C.’s ectoplasmic manifestations are graphically described by Mme. Bisson:

“On 2nd December 1910 a particularly interesting phenomenon occurred. As the by now exhausted medium asked me to give her more strength; she moved towards me, her hands outstretched, and I made a movement to take her hands. At that moment, and in full view of all the

sitters, a fully modeled arm and hand seized the medium’s left arm around the elbow and thrust her roughly backwards. Eva, frightened, cried out and started to tremble; she had an attack of nerves that I had to calm. Some minutes later the arm and hand reappeared on the medium’s knees; this time they were flat and motionless. This phenomenon is all the more remarkable in that it suggests a will operating independently of the medium, myself and others” (as cited in Barrington 2011: 5)

The so-called ‘Margery’ mediumship was arguably the real cutoff point for serious psychical research into physical mediumship. Margery was alleged, by a certain Dr. Crandon, to have produced a variety of impressive physical phenomena. Dr. Walter Franklin Prince, one of the chief investigators of Margery’s (Mina Crandon’s) mediumship, provides a survey of some of her feats:

“At hundreds of sittings, it is claimed, ‘ectoplasmic’ limbs – extruded from her body and afterwards reabsorbed – have performed various acts, such as touching persons seated nearby in the darkness, shoving, lifting and throwing objects, overturning a small table, ringing the bell in a box activated by contact cover, producing phosphorescent lights, etc.” (Prince 1926: 431)

Mina Crandon’s mediumship, however, was very publicly declared fraudulent by the escape artists Harry Houdini in a pamphlet entitled “Houdini Exposes the Tricks Used by the Boston Medium ‘Margery’” published in 1924 (Polidoro 2001). Over the course of his public debunking Houdini employed increasingly tight controls on the medium including, at one point, completely



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sealing the medium within a specially constructed wooden box, with only her head and hands visible (Polidoro 2001: 143-145). Her ectoplasmic protrusions were called into question when, in 1925, the Society for Psychical Research sent Eric Dingwall to investigate Mina Crandon's claimed abilities and discovered that her ectoplasm was apparently composed of "animal lung material" (Polidoro 2001: 155). This form of public debunking likely contributed to the demise of physical mediumship. Nevertheless, ectoplasmic materialisations of varying quality were present, though becoming increasingly rare, in physical mediumship demonstrations right into the 1930s and 1940s. This later physical mediumship is perhaps best exemplified by the mediumship of Jack Webber (1907-1940) (see Edwards 1978) and Helen Duncan (1897-1956) (see Gaskill 2001; Hartley 2007). The following is a description of the process of materialization and dematerialization during Jack Webber's seances:

"...at first a vague, shadowy form is seen, darker than the prevailing light. This form then becomes denser, and the hands and head are held to the red light for closer examination. The red light is about

nine feet from the floor, yet the materialized people are able to rise to it from the floor and expose their heads in close proximity to the bulb... When a form has built up in the red light, its disappearance is of interest. Standing full length in the centre of the circle, it is seen to diminish downwards as if passing through the floor. The period of time necessary for the disappearance is about two seconds. After the disappearance of a form, throat action is heard from the medium – gulp like sounds, rather similar to those made when ectoplasm is returning to the medium's body" (Edwards 1978: 96-97)

Again, accounts from the seances of Helen Duncan, arguably the last of the "great" physical mediums, feature many of the same characteristic descriptions of ectoplasmic materialisations and dematerialisations as earlier accounts of other mediums:

"Witnesses used terms such as disappeared, vanished, melted, sinking towards the floor... Mrs. Lock stated her mother disappeared down to the floor when seeing her on the 17th and 18th of January and her friend Pinkie who did so displaying a clear face with a red complexion with hair. He drifted down to the ground. Mrs. Jennings was so struck by the way the figures disappeared she explained in her testimony that she took a special interest and stood to observe the method. She explained at the trial that the head portion went first, then the shoulders down. The last thing she could see was a lot of white on the floor. She explained they all disappeared in the same way. Mr. Lock also described this same method for a figure purporting to be his sister Sally... He described how the white form disappeared towards the ground" (Hartley 2007: 205)

The phenomena described so far (raps, levitations, the movement of objects and ectoplasmic materialisations), form the basic itinerary of what I will term "classical physical mediumship," which flourished roughly from 1848 onwards with a gradual decline in activity after around about 1945. Although Spiritualism by no means disappeared after this period, physical mediumship certainly suffered a lull in interest. Numerous explanations for this have been offered, including: the idea that, in our busy modern world, people no longer have the time or energy to devote themselves to the development of physical mediumship; the idea that the harsh ways in which physical mediums had been tested in

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the lab put people off developing mediumship, and the idea that the numerous exposures of fraudulent mediums had given the profession a bad reputation which put people off entering into it (Foy 2007). Whatever the reasons, it wasn't until the late 1990s that interest in physical mediumship returned to the popular consciousness. A reinvigorated interest in physical mediumship developed after the publication of Montague Keen and David Fontana's "The Scole Report" by the Society for Psychical Research in 1999 (Moreman 2010: 164), and the popularised version "The Scole Experiment: Scientific Evidence for Life After Death" by Grant and Jane Solomon, also published in the same year. Montague Keen (2001) describes the basic claims made about the Scole experiments:

"Based on two years of regular séances, the Group's chief claims were that they had established contact with a "team" of spirit communicators comprising, or in contact with, a number of former scientists. These had been accessed through...a husband and wife team, both of whom entered swiftly into deep trance, remaining thus throughout the proceedings, of which they retained no conscious recollection. The purported discarnate contacts had facilitated the manifestation of spirit lights, moved furniture, created apports (objects appearing from no known source and by no known means), displayed shadowy figures described as angelic forms, and produced films, allegedly employing a novel form of energy not involving the traditional ectoplasmic extrusions with their enervating and sometimes physically hazardous, and invariably contentious, associations." (Keen 2001:167-168)

One of the chief developments of the Scole group, in terms of the history of physical mediumship, was their



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claim that a new "form of energy," significantly different to the ectoplasm of classical physical mediumship, was the basis of the physical phenomena being produced. Ectoplasm, it would seem, was considered dangerous by the Scole group's guiding spirit team and so was necessarily replaced. Indeed, numerous mediums and psychical researchers have commented on the potential dangers involved in the production of ectoplasm. This shift towards the use of a "new energy" has been quite influential in the development of subsequent physical mediumship circles who have been inspired to conduct their own experiments after reading descriptions of those carried out at Scole. The Bristol Spirit Lodge, the group with whom I conduct my own fieldwork (Hunter 2009; 2011), often utilises a glass bell-jar for the containment of "energies" directly inspired by the recommendations of the Scole group, for example. Nevertheless, while modern physical mediumship circles do claim to employ this "new energy," the use of ectoplasm continues to be a particularly common feature of physical seances along with other of the traditional physical phenomena, such as "spirit lights" and raps. Indeed, the founder of the Bristol Spirit Lodge was inspired by the experience of "traditional" physical mediumship on 24th May 2006 in Banbury, Oxfordshire:

"My personal evidence was followed by the display of a misty formation that was barely visible within the set red-light conditions. In these conditions I could see the shapes of sitters all seated in their chairs around the room. They were all there. There were no empty chairs. So, I could see a haze, of perhaps 'something else,' some partial materialized 'something' near the cabinet" (Di Nucci 2009: 23-24)

More elaborate descriptions of classical ectoplasmic materialisations produced in private home-circles are now emerging on the internet. For example, the following is extracted from a report by Dr. Mnam of a seance conducted with the Felix Experimental Group in Germany (see Braude 2010), in April 2011. The description focusses primarily on the process by which ectoplasm was seen to be produced by the medium. Many of the characteristics of the ectoplasmic productions in this account do seem to match descriptions from the earlier literature of psychical research:

"When the red light was turned on for the first time, all sitters could plainly see a whitish cloth-like mass protruding from the medium's mouth. He bent to the front and seemed to facilitate the

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ectoplasm's outflow...by accompanying movements of both hands. During the first display, the ectoplasm was comparably short, perhaps, 30-40 cm; during the second display shortly after it had already reached the floor... The next two displays in red light simply showed the ectoplasmic veil lying curled on the floor between and in front of the medium's feet. There was no connection to the medium's body... The next two displays showed the supposed hand of HB, who announced that he would sort of dip his own hand into the mass and aggregate the ectoplasmic hand accordingly, then waving to the sitters with it. The purpose of this was to show the autonomous quality of the mass, and its ability to move. Indeed, a hand-like shape had risen about 30 cm upward, continued to rise some other 10 cm, and performed jerky waving movements... This ectoplasm was of condensed matter, not the veil-like stuff from before. It looked more like solid cloth... The next two displays showed how a different column of ectoplasm moved upward on

the mediums body, from the belly region towards the right chest. It was again of the veil-like quality... It seemed to grow and move on its own behalf...the medium's body was perfectly still, his arms hanging straight down at the sides... HB announced that the medium would wrap the ectoplasmic veil around his entire body (with his hands) to supply the body with energy. Indeed, when the lamp was switched on again, the medium was covered all over by an extremely fine and very thin white veil (the "cocoon" condition)." (Mnahm 2011)

The following account is taken from a report of a seance held in England in October 2011 with the medium Stewart Alexander. It describes the apparent transformation of an amorphous "blob" of ectoplasm into a well formed human hand:

"Walter returned and asked that everyone return to their seats and away from the table. The table had a translucent top with a red light underneath it, so that we could see what was happening on its surface without harm to Stewart. Walter then invited Brian K. to sit at the table across from him. Soon a blob of ectoplasm could be seen on the illuminated table top. It slowly formed into a large hand which Walter said was his. It knocked on the table and Brian said that it was a big hand. Next, Walter asked Brian to place his right hand on the table with his palm downwards. We could see that the hand moved toward Brian's hand and he announced that it was holding his hand and that it felt like a human hand." (Butler & Butler 2011)

My own encounters with visible ectoplasm at the Bristol Spirit Lodge, although not quite as dramatic as that produced by the Felix Circle, also appears continuous with the general tradition of physical mediumship. The following extract is taken from my field-notes dated 05/02/2011:

"The first time [ectoplasm] was produced on a glowing board and appeared like a sausage in silhouette. It moved as though pulled... The second example of ectoplasm production was a thin strip of the substance apparently protruding from the cabinet – somehow attached to the top of the spirit trumpet (a cone of sheet aluminium). This took a while to develop in darkness, and when it was fully present the spirit voice told Christine to turn the red light up slowly. The ectoplasm looked

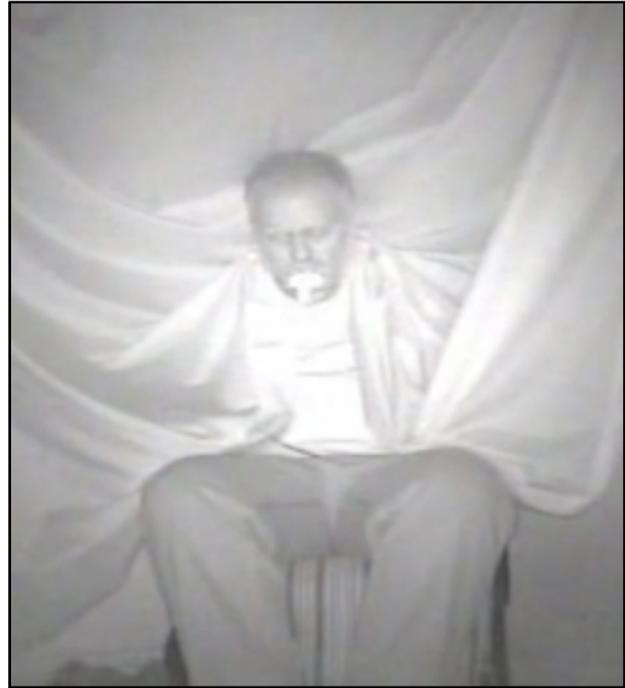


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remarkably like a thin strip of silk (on talking to Sandy in the car on the way home she too thought it looked like a piece of silk). The spirit voice asked if we would like to see it move, we of course replied with a resounding “Yes!” The light was asked to be switched off and when it was turned on again the strip of ectoplasm waggled about a little, quite unimpressively. The sitters were apparently impressed by this demonstration.”

Again, it must be stressed that regardless of whether or not the phenomenon observed in this instance was real ectoplasm produced by paranormal means is irrelevant to an examination of the culture of physical mediumship. This event, as well as the other descriptions of contemporary ectoplasm presented here, was clearly within the same tradition as the ectoplasmic manifestations of mediums at the turn of the nineteenth century, though they would appear to be of a much diminished quality. In comparison with the dramatic and extravagant, and often full-body, materialisations described in the earlier literature of psychical research the ectoplasmic manifestations of the modern world are distinctly lacking. Why could this be? Writing on the history of ectoplasm in volume two of his “The History of Spiritualism” (Doyle 2006 [1926]) Arthur Conan Doyle noted precisely the same thing:

“When we examine the descriptions of the appearance of ectoplasm in Spiritualistic circles forty and fifty years ago, and compare them with those in our own day, we see how much richer



were the earlier results” (Doyle 2006 [1926] Vol. II: 47)

The explanation he offers for this apparent degradation in the phenomenon was that attitudes towards mediums had changed. He writes: “At least...the early researchers observed one golden rule. They surrounded the medium with an atmosphere of love and sympathy” (ibid.). By the time Doyle was writing his history of the Spiritualist movement, physical mediums were subject to increasingly severe forms of testing, perhaps best exemplified by the methods employed by the psychical researcher Harry Price (cf. Tabori 1968: 90 for a description of Harry Price’s electrically controlled seances). In addition to this, the popular image of the physical medium was becoming increasingly associated with the notion of fraud and dishonesty, which naturally did not bode well for the way in which mediums were perceived and treated by those who attended their demonstrations. A further reason might also be found in the shift in the perspective of psychical researchers towards a laboratory based approach, inspired by the establishment of Dr. J.B. Rhine’s parapsychological laboratory at Duke University in 1930, with its focus directed firmly on the much subtler mental phenomena of ESP and clairvoyance. Physical mediumship was, by the 1930s, simply out of fashion and has never really regained its status as a respectable practice for either mediums or researchers. Perhaps the renewed interest in the practice of physical mediumship that has developed over the last decade,

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coupled with the interests of serious psychical researchers to investigate such groups (for example Prof. Stephen Braude's investigations with the Felix Experimental Group), will lead to the reinstatement of some of the more elaborate physical phenomena described in the early literature of psychical research.

To conclude, then, I feel it is fair to say that contemporary physical mediumship is, in essence, a continuation of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century tradition, though it has degraded quite considerably due to a variety of factors, some of which have just been discussed. The situation is reminiscent of a similar scenario described by the anthropologist Zeljko Jokic (2008) with regard to the practice of contemporary Buriat shamanism. Traditional Buriat shamanism was banned in Buriatia, Siberia, by the Soviet Russian authorities. Jokic writes of the practices of contemporary neo-shamans in Buriatia, who are striving to reinvigorate the traditional forms of shamanism practiced before the Soviet period, and describes how the inability of the modern neo-shamans to recall their trance journeys is indicative of lost knowledge about the techniques of the traditional shamans who were able to remember and describe their trance experiences. Jokic writes:

“The apparently unconscious trance of modern shamans from the Tengeri association is the direct result of the stress and discontinuity that come from the inhibition of the system during the Soviet times, which has left a deep impact on Buriat culture. Fortunately, it appears that the shamans are well on their way to reclaiming the “eternal blue sky” over modern-day Buriatia” (Jokic 2008: 45)

Perhaps contemporary physical mediumship could be viewed in a similar way. The culture and practice has degraded under a bad reputation, and only with the dedicated work of those who are striving to reinvigorate, promote and develop it will physical mediumship become as dramatic as it was when the pioneers of psychical research described it in the nineteenth century. As anthropologists with an interest in the culture of physical mediumship, therefore, we are uniquely placed to witness, record and document the reemergence of this unusual social phenomenon.

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