

BOOK REVIEW

Indridi Indridason: The Icelandic Physical Medium by Erlendur Haraldsson and Loftur R. Gissurarson. UK: White Crow Books, 2015. xvii + 264 pp. + Index. \$17.99. ISBN 978-1-910121-50-4.

Indridi Indridason: The Icelandic Physical Medium is the second important book to be issued recently about spectacular, relatively unknown physical mediums, the evidence for whom would be inaccessible to English-speaking people if it were not for the translations of the original material by their authors.

The first, Zofia Weaver's excellent *Other Realities? The Enigma of Franek Kluski's Mediumship* (Weaver 2015) was reviewed in the Fall 2015 issue of this journal, and now we have Erlendur Haraldsson and Loftur Gissurarson's definitive book on the short-lived but extraordinary Icelandic medium, Indridi Indridason.

Haraldsson has reported details of his investigation into Indridason's mediumship for years. Those articles have been compiled together with translations of "new" material that the authors have unearthed for this volume.

Indridi Indridason, born in 1883, was a farmer's son from a rural area of Iceland. When he was about 21, he went to live in the capital, Reykjavik, to become a printer's apprentice. He lived in the home of a relative whose wife was interested in experimenting with table turning and séances. In early 1905 she asked the young man to participate, and as soon as he sat at the table it trembled, shook, and started to move violently about the room even overturning once. Indridi himself was rather shaken but evidently intrigued enough to continue with the experiments.

The authors compare him to D. D. Home, but whereas we know a great deal about Home's childhood and that his manifestations began literally in the cradle (which would rock itself when he was an infant), the only thing known about Indridi before he was 21 was that he had some "remarkable visions."

The gifted young man agreed to participate in experiments and soon was causing objects to move or levitate, and sometimes produced raps or knocking sounds in response to sitters' requests. In time there were also gusts of cold or warm air, odors or fragrances, the playing of musical instruments as if by invisible hands, various light phenomena from large,

luminous clouds to “fire flashes” or “fire balls,” materializations of human figures or body parts such as hands or fingers, and once an animal that seemed to be a cross between a horse and a calf.

Indridi produced some of the classic phenomena such as sitters feeling touched and pulled, but some of the phenomena became violent at times and he was dragged bodily on the floor or pulled up into the air, once nearly being dragged out a window and another time in danger of being injured by forces almost too strong for his helpers to counteract.

It was said that he had a temper, although I don’t recall anything about his acting angry, but many of his phenomena resembled outbreaks of RSPK or “poltergeisty” in their violence, e.g., chairs being pulled out from beneath people and furniture being tossed about, piled up, or broken.

According to his controllers, his arm dematerialized, and although it was pitch dark they carefully felt his shoulder and upper body and could detect no trace of it.

One of the most remarkable phenomena was his ability to produce direct voice, that is, voices that seem not to come from the medium’s vocal cords but originate in various parts of the room. What is unique I believe to Indridi is that the voices would not only talk and perhaps chastise sitters for breaking rules, but at times the beautiful voice of a woman, a trained voice, would be heard singing a duet with a deep male voice. The two voices were heard simultaneously! (The woman was thought by the sitters to be Maria Malibran, whom they described as a “French lady.” Malibran was born in Paris of Spanish parents and was the most famous singer of the 19th century. She died in England in 1836. Indridi might not have known of her, but certainly his investigators, who were educated men, would have.) The voices Indridi produced were many and varied and were heard not only in the experimental room but in Indridi’s vicinity outdoors or in other venues as well. In one case a sitter said he recognized the distinctive voice of a deceased friend whom Indridi had never met.

Indridi also produced direct writing in which a pencil would write on paper left somewhere in the room out of reach of the medium. D. D. Home was partially successful in trying to do this, but that feat was a trademark of Gilbert Roller and the Bindelof group, which produced many such messages (Pilkington 2006). One letter written in large, rounded script was supposedly from Malibran, although this could not be verified, but another purported to be from the composer Edvard Grieg contained a signature similar to his.

The most important of Indridi’s investigators was Dr. Gudmundur Hannesson, a district medical officer and later Professor of Medicine at the University of Iceland and founder of the Icelandic Scientific Society. He was a skeptic, not a spiritualist as were the other observers, was knowledgeable

about fraudulent mediums' tricks, and conducted more tightly controlled investigations of Indridi. In a letter to another investigator he wrote that during a whole winter of séances that he attended, "there was not hardly one at which I did not try to detect fraud in one way or another" (p. 160). But he was never able to ascertain any fraud and was convinced that the bulk of the phenomena were genuine, "whatever their cause may have been."

Hannesson astutely notices that the voices produced commonly are hardly intelligible when the "speakers" appear for the first time, "but gradually become plainer as time goes on" (p. 165). He continues:

These "dead" people are questioned about anything between heaven and earth, but little benefit is derived from their answers, and it is not unusual that they commit themselves to actual mis-statements about things known to persons who are present. They seldom have a clear recollection of their life here. Their answers vary greatly, but most of them are unlike what one would expect from the spirits of eminent personages. (pp. 165–166)

The authors were able to obtain from Hannesson's descendents unpublished notes describing séances held with Indridi in Hannesson's house, where any suspicion of accomplices, hidden devices, etc., could be ruled out and even stricter controls could be exercised. Indridi had never visited the house. He was asked to undress and was provided with special clothes, wound with string fastened to his jacket, which was also sewn closed, and his "watchman" or control held the string that was left over, ensuring that the medium could not reach anything farther from him than the watchman's chair. Phosphorescent tape was put on the watchman's shoulder so that the observers could see his movements in the dark. Despite the precautions, there were many phenomena including touchings, knocks quite far from Indridi, female and male voices, the medium levitating at least a couple of feet in the air, etc. Examination of the medium's bonds afterward showed nothing suspicious and the sewing was undisturbed.

Other séances reported on by Hannesson are included in which Indridi produced a variety of strong phenomena that could not be explained away by normal means.

The authors have added several appendices charting (A) the sequence of séances in chronological order and phenomena reported, (B) a summary of Hannesson's major methods of investigation, (C) a comparison of Indridi with D. D. Home, and (D) a list of séance participants, deceased communicators, witnesses, etc.

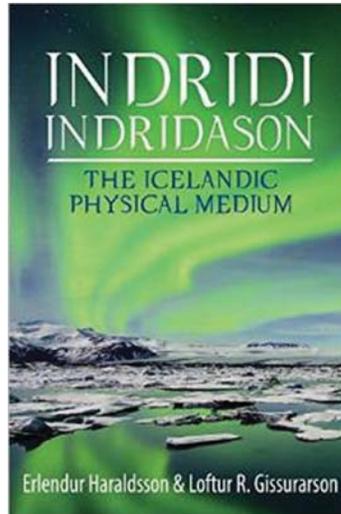
Appendix C tells only part of the story, but is a good start toward a needed in-depth comparison of all the major physical mediums, which I think would be very useful in helping us to understand the similarities and

differences among these rare and unusual people and try to begin to solve the mystery of how these phenomena come about.

What I found lacking in this volume, except for some comments of Hannesson's, is a much-needed psychological analysis of what was going on. Indridi Indridason was a young man with, unfortunately, a very short life: He discovered his gift when he was 22 or 23, died at 28, and wasn't able to hold séances in the last couple of years of his life owing to illness. We are told that he was a pleasant and amiable young man, but he had "a temper." We are not told much about his mental-emotional frame of mind, but from the outward- and self-directed violence he experienced, there must have been anger and/or frustration that had gone unreported. We know very little about his inner life, attitudes, interpersonal relations, etc., which I think is essential to analyzing any mind-body interaction.

The authors acknowledge "the inevitable question" of the origin of these phenomena: "Did they originate solely and exclusively in the medium, or were they beyond him and working through him?" (p. 227). They seem to come down firmly on the latter theory, the survival hypothesis, citing that facts were sometimes revealed that were unknown to the medium, such as reporting on a fire that "should not have interested" him more than any other fire, personifying "communicating entities," who Indridi never knew when they were alive, displaying vocal skills when "No opera singers were living in Iceland at the time" (p. 228), or speaking in languages unknown to him. This last, the authors maintain, "indicates an independence of the communicating entities from the person and capabilities of Indridi and may be interpreted as evidence for their genuineness" (p. 228).

These factors could point, as the authors contend, toward human survival of bodily death, but they could also point to psychic and psychokinetic abilities by the living Indridi. Yes, facts and foreign language may have been "unknown" to him, but not to the others in the room who were eager for evidence of their loved ones' continued existence. Indridi may have been unfamiliar with opera singers, but his sitters and investigators were not, and it is probable that they knew of Maria Malibran, who was world-famous. The same applies to the languages, which, too, may have been unknown to him, but were known to some of the sitters. We do know that, especially



in trance, as Indridi mostly was, the medium is extremely telepathic and clairvoyant and could easily be obtaining the images, sounds, and languages of the deceased from the audience.

As for the fire in Copenhagen, Indridi may or may not have had a personal interest in it, but others in the room may have had: We don't have enough information to know. Many would classify it as classic clairvoyance.

The majority of sitters were believers in an afterlife, as was Indridi. It would have been remarkable if he didn't produce "proof" of spirit existence. In the interest of science, perhaps we should adopt Hannesson's attitude: ". . . the bulk of the phenomena were, as far as I could judge, quite genuine, whatever their cause may have been" (pp. 202–203).

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References Cited

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