

References

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Investigations of the Paranormal by Tony Cornell. New York: Helix Press, 2002. \$36.00. ISBN 0-912328-98-3.

This book is by a Cambridge University graduate who apparently has lived in Cambridge all his life. The book is essentially a detailed account of his career as an investigator of the paranormal. At the end he makes some general conclusions.

The book is in four sections. The first has eleven chapters on hauntings and the second, nine on poltergeists. Then there is a section on mediums and mediumship which contains seven chapters, and finally the last section on conclusions has three chapters.

The general attitude throughout the book is rather lighthearted. The author's investigations are a monument to the need for skepticism about all claims of the paranormal. There are several examples of blatant fraud and two of self-deception.

On the other hand, it would be difficult for anyone who is open-minded and who reads the book thoroughly not to conclude that the author has observed phenomena which undoubtedly do occur but which are not explicable in terms of present knowledge. The book is strong on local history in the University of Cambridge, and most of the investigations described take place in Cambridge and the surrounding towns.

The book starts off with an account of ghosts alleged to haunt in the University. Some turn out to be illusions, although other accounts are open-ended in conclusion.

In Chapter 3 there is reliance on answers to Ouija Board questions about a ghost which is alleged to haunt a remote inn. Cornell believes the people who claim to have seen the ghost were overcome by the stories they had heard and created her image.

Then in Chapter 6 there is a story called "Seen and Unseen Ghosts" in which a number of people claim to have seen a ghost, this time a ginger-haired man in a green jacket. Cornell is more positive to the reality of the occurrences here

because the principal reporter of it knew nothing about the ghost when he describes what he has seen.

By Chapter 8 we are on the Queen Mary docked in Long Beach, California, which apparently has many alleged ghosts, particularly connected with that part of the boat damaged in the accident in which the Mary collided with an accompanying cruiser during a trans-Atlantic crossing in WWII. Cornell fails to confirm paranormal phenomena here and thinks that the accounts that he has heard were reactions to nerves and publicity.

Chapter 9 concerns a couple who spent the first night of their honeymoon in the Bell Hotel, built in 1493 in Thetford, Norfolk. They say they have experienced running feet, someone passing up and down the corridor outside. Then Mr. M awakens and sees standing near the settee a young, pale-faced, blond girl, age between 13 and 15. She walks toward the window and disappears. Corresponding phenomena involve the sheets of the bed being pulled up over Mr. M's face by an unknown entity three times, and the story comes out that this ghost is well known to the people in the hotel and has been seen by several people. In fact, even the occupants of the room next door decided to quit their room because of the phenomena. When Mr. M asks about that, the receptionist says, "Well, she tends to wander."

Later on, Mr. M is overcome when he is confronted with the picture of a certain Elizabeth Radcliffe. It is 300 years old but portrays an older version of the girl whom he has seen in his room.

Then comes a remarkable story about the death of Cornell's dog. When Boozer is 12 years old, she has too many ills to continue living and they decide she must be put down. He takes her to the vet, but emotionally he cannot accompany her through the end and waits outside to take her body home. He leaves it in the car while he goes and sees his mother, who says, "Where is she? Has she escaped?" Cornell replies that the body is outside in the car. "But," his mother says, "I saw her a few minutes ago." The dog was seen scampering into the kitchen where the mother had stood, but the dog kept on turning around to look at her right leg, the one in which the fatal injections had been put.

In Chapter 11 we have a less than forthright chapter on photographs of ghosts. Here the author comes across as being a debunker: "I do not maintain that a normal explanation can be found for all supposed psychic photographs," but he recommends that strong skepticism should be applied to them.

By Chapter 12 we have moved on to poltergeists. The auditory effects include thumps, bells, swishing of skirts, and moans. Among the physical effects are inundations of water from empty pipes, things that fly around, household objects moved, and spontaneous fires. In modern times, telephones ring for no particular reason, electric bulbs explode in unison, and toilets are heard to flush when no one has used them.

Then follows a series of chapters describing Cornell's detective work in assessing whether any of the several cases of poltergeists to which he has been called is real.

The first one, described in Chapter 13, seems to be fraudulent. It concerns a Mr. Adams, who says he is constantly assaulted by strange noises. Cornell is suspicious and after a long burst of thumps has broken out upstairs, he finds that there is a wire, part of the old Victorian bell-ringing system, which the old man can operate from his seat by the fire with his left hand out of sight. He wanted to frighten away his daughter-in-law.

Chapter 15 concerns a ghost and poltergeists in a shoe shop, and here the Cambridge University Society of Psychic Research supplies an investigating team. The end on this one is rather ambiguous. A lot of things get explained, but a line of bare right footprints in the dust is difficult to explain. Furthermore, a rugby team which spent two hours on an all-night ghost watch decided that they would like to leave much earlier than they had previously promised to stay.

Chapter 17 is about a fisherman, Mr. H, who, when at home, claims he is being attacked by an invincible black dog which leaps upon him and scratches him. There are scratches over his body, but his tale becomes less convincing when it turns out that he has a razor blade in his pocket. Cornell decides that he has been inflicting the scratches on himself, largely to gain attention.

Chapter 18 is all about extraordinary poltergeistic events which occur in a house which is near a radio transmitter, and this becomes the focus of possible effects. Could it be that it really is the high-powered transmitter which is causing all these peculiar things (e.g., 13-amp sockets burst into flame) to happen? Cornell concludes there may have been a poltergeist at work or perhaps the wife of the house caused it all; at least it was she with whom the poltergeist was associated.

Chapter 19 is called "A Stone Thrower." Here is a man whom Cornell identifies as the poltergeistic agent, always somewhere around the curious things that happen, such as showers of stones landing on the roof of the house.

Chapter 20 is a remarkable account of "the Sorrat phenomena." This refers to a group of workers in Rolla, Missouri, who use an inverted fish tank, well-fixed to the table, inside of which they put things including letters addressed to people outside, some of them in other countries. They claim to witness psychokinesis of objects within the fish tank, but the most remarkable claim is that the letters get sent and arrive in the other countries!

Here I thought that Cambridge University's Cornell gave the American investigators undue contempt. He ridicules it all, taking the remarkable attitude, "How could such things occur, this is absurd." There is much to investigate, but the author did not satisfy me that he had adjudicated it all in a proper scientific spirit but rather had inconsistently used classical science to show the claimed events were impossible.

Section three is about mediums. Here the general tone is extremely skeptical—and the constant threat of fraud is encouraged by the darkened room. In one case, Cornell does seize the hand of a medium who was supposed to be sitting in her chair in trance but in fact had gotten up to walk forward. But in other cases he has no explanation for trumpets which move around in the darkness but have attached to them some phosphorescent paint. How are they

carried around, and why do they stop in front of specific people with voices coming from people who seem to be dead relatives of the people in front of them, and how can the trumpets be raised up many feet above the ground?

In seances which he arranges himself (in the light), Cornell finds tables which stand up on two legs. He lies on the floor under one of them to see that there is nobody lifting them. Some of the phenomena which he reports from the seance room satisfy him that extraordinary events really do take place, but he is very leery of the spiritualistic interpretation and suggests several times that “this all comes from the minds of the sitters.” Whether such an unspecific suggestion proves anything seems to me to be doubtful. In the conclusion, he agrees that the seance room is neglected and that there are things happening there which must be looked into. The key to it all—as he multiply stresses—would be use of the infrared camera which can take pictures in the darkness. It is, of course, suspicious that the mediums all say that they would welcome photography, but when Cornell attempted to introduce it, he was forcefully prevented from doing so.

He describes several cases in which he believes there is evidence that the medium did not move from her chair during the performance in which so many strange things occur (including materialization of people), and he confirms that the medium is usually exhausted at the end of the performance and often has to be helped up from her chair.

He concludes that there are paranormal things at work; telepathy or PK occurs, and perhaps precognition. But Cornell wants to eliminate the spirits and interpret the phenomena as “psychokinesis.”

Although he finds fault in some cases in the seance room, there are others where he does not, and he can only say that the effects occur and that he can't explain them.

This is a sound book. The phenomena reported are difficult to disbelieve. As to the interpretation, Cambridge University's Cornell just cannot accept a spiritistic one and so he has to fall back on an unknown energy by which some humans must be able to bring about “impossible” effects.

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Consciousness Studies is an encyclopedic work that will appeal to university professors in the fields of philosophy, psychology, religious studies, and intercultural studies as well as to researchers working just outside their fields of