

BOOK REVIEW

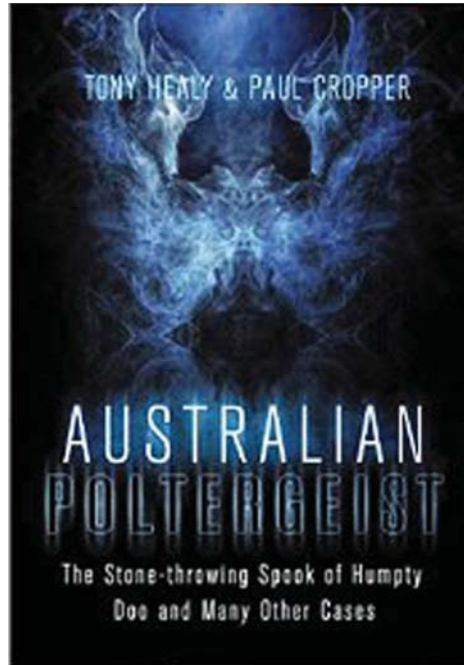
Australian Poltergeist: The Stone-Throwing Spook of Humpty Doo and Many Other Cases by Tony Healy and Paul Cropper. Strange Nation, 2014. 300 pp. ISBN 978-1-921134-34-0 (print), 978-1-921134-35-7 (digital).

No doubt this breezily written and informative volume will fill a gaping lacuna in most *JSE* readers' knowledge of evidence for psychokinesis generally and poltergeist phenomena in particular. It certainly did for me. Healy and Cropper survey 52 different Australian cases, spanning the years 1845–2002. The first eleven chapters cover the authors' 11 strongest cases in considerable detail. Chapter 12 describes the remaining 41 cases more briefly, and catalogues all 52 cases in chronological order. Chapter 13 purports to wrap things up, but it's followed by three appendices introducing additional cases outside Australia and brief discussions of similar or at least potentially relevant physical mysteries—for example, some Asian fire poltergeist cases, ball lightning, UFOs, and reported rains of fishes.

The authors rate their cases on a five-star scale, which they apply judiciously. Ratings begin at zero for apparent or proven hoaxes, and then range from half a star (“for questionable or very poorly documented cases” [p. 7]) to five stars. Healy and Cropper write: “With only two exceptions, we have reserved the four and five-star rating for very well documented cases where we were able to interview the eyewitnesses or in which we had some other personal involvement” (p. 7). The case they consider the strongest—the Mayanup case from 1955–2002—is the only one to earn five stars. Humpty Doo (1998)—possibly the most famous, or notorious—gets four and a half. Several cases earned between three and four stars, and quite a few get either zero stars or half a star.

The two highest-rated cases are genuinely interesting. In the Humpty Doo case, many credible observers witnessed the phenomena under conditions that quite clearly seemed to rule out chicanery, and which conformed to poltergeist reports in other parts of the world. The phenomena included “showers of stones both indoors and out, dangerous objects thrown with great force but without causing injury, objects falling unnaturally slowly yet producing unnaturally loud sounds on impact, objects observed levitating, objects observed materializing in mid-air” (p. 48), the intense heat of apported objects, and more.

The Mayanup poltergeist case was most active during the period 1955–1957, but persisted sporadically thereafter, and as in the Humpty-Doo case the phenomena were witnessed by many people under conditions in which allegations of fraud seem preposterous. And here, too, the phenomena fit many of the classic poltergeist patterns. Stones and other objects seemed to fall out of nowhere, and sometimes so many stones fell at once that appeals to hoaxing can easily be ruled out. One witness described this as “showers of stones falling like hail.” Moreover, although the stones were usually “pea-size to fist-size,” (p. 60), some seem



too large to have been hurled by a hoaxer, including one rock described as pumpkin-sized, which descended “slowly through the air, ‘as if it was being lowered’.” In fact, many of the falling objects didn’t fall normally. Some floated gently to the ground. Some stones, which had been flying rapidly, landed with an unexpected soft thud or “plop,” as if made of cork. And those objects never rolled when they hit the ground; instead, they stopped when they hit, as if they had no momentum. And in this case as well, many of the falling objects were very warm to the touch.

The authors don’t always see eye-to-eye on how to interpret their cases. Paul tends to favor the view that poltergeist phenomena are “caused by psychokinesis generated unwittingly by people at the centre of activity” (p. 260). But Tony “favours the idea that disembodied spirits are often involved” (ibid). In any case, this book is weakest on matters of interpretation and theory. Discussions of those topics tend to be somewhat perfunctory, but to their credit the authors at least do some sensitive probing into the potential underlying psychogenesis of the phenomena (I found the alternative spiritistic conjectures rather more simplistic). But the real value of the book lies in its quite thorough presentation of case detail. In the Humpty Doo case, the authors witnessed some phenomena for themselves, and in some other cases they were at least able to interview witnesses. For the older

cases it seems that the authors were both conscientious and meticulous in their research. And for all cases they seem balanced in their presentation of the evidence, carefully weighing the pros and cons of both normal and paranormal interpretations of the phenomena.

I was disappointed, however, in Healy and Cropper's failure to acknowledge the detailed and often groundbreaking contributions to the poltergeist literature by Alan Gauld, Tony Cornell, Hans Bender, and William Roll, among many others (see, e.g., Bender 1974, Gauld & Cornell 1979, Roll 2004). Although they frequently (and quite properly) mention the work of Colin Wilson, Guy Playfair, and D. Scott Rogo, it may be that their neglect of other major figures betrays a lack of real acquaintance with much of the significant work in this area, and perhaps that accounts for some of the superficiality in the authors' efforts to interpret the cases. Similarly, on several occasions, I felt it would have been in their interest to mention connections between the case they were discussing and some other quite important cases, such as that of Eleonore Zugun (see, e.g., Mulacz 1999).

The book is written in a very easy, conversational, and often amusing style, and was enjoyable to read. The Humpty Doo case—the first one covered in the book—even begins “It was a dark and stormy night.” Despite this very light and informal approach, the authors managed to convey a great deal of useful information and valuable detail. I wish, however, that they had been more careful about proofreading, or at least more diligent in enlisting the services of a grammarian. There were too many syntactical abominations of the forms: “the phenomena was witnessed” and “the phenomena is caused.” My word processor (like many) simply balks when I try entering such constructions (as just happened when I wrote those phrases for this review!); so how could the authors have missed these errors?

But despite these relatively minor lapses, I consider *Australian Poltergeist* to be a valuable resource and a worthwhile addition to the empirical poltergeist literature.

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