

Sir William Crookes (1832-1919)

Sir William Crookes (June 17, 1832- April 4, 1919) was an esteemed British physicist and chemist who ventured into psychical research in 1869, primarily to investigate mediumship. He is most remembered for his investigations of Daniel Dunglas Home and Florence Cook. While he expected to discover fraud, Crookes came away from his investigations as a believer in mediumship and other psychic phenomena.

The *Dictionary of National Biography* refers to Crookes as a “Victorian Man of Science” and tells of his many contributions to physics and chemistry. However, it makes only passing reference to his controversial “excursions into psychical research,” seemingly excusing him for such an indiscretion by explaining that Sir William thought all phenomena worthy of investigation, and refused to be bound by tradition and convention.

A Fellow of the Royal Society, Crookes studied and taught at the Royal College of Chemistry before becoming a meteorologist at the Radcliffe Observatory, Oxford. In 1858, he inherited enough money to set up his own laboratory in London. In 1861, he discovered the element thallium, and later invented the radiometer, the spintharoscope, and the Crookes tube, a high-vacuum tube which contributed to the discovery of the X-ray. He was founder and editor of *Chemical News* and later served as editor of the *Quarterly Journal of Science*. Knighted in 1897 for his scientific work, he was not someone to be easily duped or to fabricate strange stories.

He was awarded the Order of Merit in 1910 and received honorary degrees in law and science from Birmingham, Oxford, Cambridge,

Ireland, Cape of Good Hope, Sheffield, and Durham universities.



“When I first stated in the [*Quarterly Journal of Science*, October, 1871] that I was about to investigate the phenomena of so-called Spiritualism, the announcement called forth universal expression of approval,” Crookes wrote. “[It was said] that ‘if men like Mr. Crookes grapple with the subject, taking nothing for granted until it is proved, we shall soon know how much to believe.’ These remarks, however, were written too hastily. It was taken for granted by the writers that the results of my experiments would be in accordance with their preconception. What they really desired was not *the truth*, but an additional witness in favor of their own foregone conclusion. When they found that the facts which that investigation established could not be made to fit those opinions, why – ‘so much the worse for the facts.’ They try to creep out of their confident recommendations of the enquiry by declaring that ‘Mr.

Home is a clever conjurer, who has duped us all.”¹

Over a period of some three years, ending July 2, 1873, Crookes had 29 sittings with Home and observed many different phenomena, including levitations, phantoms, a floating accordion playing music, luminous hands, luminous clouds, and communication from invisible entities. A number of his fellow scientists were present at some of the sittings, but few of them would go public with their observations. Alfred Russel Wallace, co-originator with Charles Darwin of the natural selection theory of evolution, was an exception.

On April 12, 1871, Crookes reported that one of his guests was levitated out of his chair, floated across the table, and dropped with a crash at the other end of the room. This was repeated a second time and also with another guest. After that, they witnessed an accordion float across the room while invisible hands played “one of the most sacred pieces I have ever heard, and being accompanied by a very fine male voice.”² Sweet voices then addressed them, although Crookes did not report what they had to say.

“As the evening got on the power increased,” Crookes continued, “and hands came amongst us. Serjeant Cox had a book taken from his pocket, and whilst it was being removed he liberated one of his hands (joining the hands of those on each side of him and clasping the two with his other hand, so as not to leave any person’s hand free) and he caught the fingers in the act of removing his book. It was *only a hand*, there being no arm or body attached to it, and it eluded his grasp and carried the book right across the table, where it was gently laid on my wife’s hand. Then hands came to nearly all of us, faces were stroked and our hands patted and on some occasions the fingers lingered long enough to admit of being felt. On several occasions I made rapid darts in front, trying to catch the arm when the fingers were touching near me, but not once did I touch anything. Things were then carried about

the table from one to another. Serjeant Cox’s gloves were shaken in all our faces. Home’s handkerchief was gently laid on our heads, shoulders, and hands, and then gently removed and carried elsewhere.”³

Crookes became convinced that Home was no charlatan and that some form of “psychic force” was taking place through him. He took every possible precaution in ruling out trickery, even picking Home up at his apartment and watching him dress. “I am, therefore, enabled to state positively, that no machinery, apparatus, or contrivance or any sort was secreted about his person,” Crookes further recorded, adding that most of the séances were held in his home under lighted conditions and that Home had no opportunity to rig anything in the séance room.⁴

Crookes wondered why there was so much tomfoolery. On 28, 1871, a group of spirits communicated, explaining that it was not one spirit in particular communicating through Home but a “general influence.” This general influence further explained that they were experimenting on their side just as Crookes was experimenting on his.

From 1872 to 1874, Crookes studied Florence Cook, whose mediumship involved the materialization of a spirit calling herself Katie King. Because darkness and a materialization cabinet were required, there was much suspicion that Cook was changing costumes in the cabinet and impersonating a spirit. However, Crookes reported observing both of Katie and Florence at the same time, thoroughly examining Katie King, and photographing her. “...to imagine, I say, the Katie King of the last three years to be the result of imposture does more violence to one’s reason and common sense than to believe her to be what she herself affirms,” Crookes stated.⁵

The scientific community was shocked by Crookes’s endorsement of Home and Cook. As a result, he came under attack by many closed-minded scientists – those who shared Sir David Brewster’s attitude that such phenomena were

completely opposed to scientific law and therefore there was no explanation other than that Crookes had been duped. Various theories were offered as to how he had been deceived. It mattered not that Wallace had observed Home's ability as had a number of other scholars and scientists. Moreover, rumors circulated that Crookes had a romantic interest in Miss Cook and that this fogged his judgment.

Wearied by the attacks and rumors, Crookes gave up psychical research and returned to orthodox science. While he maintained a private interest in psychical research, he spoke very little of the subject in public, often very guarded and occasionally indicating that the "psychic force" he had witnessed may not have been the work of spirits. However, in a speech before the British Association for the Advancement of Science in 1898, he said he had nothing to retract. His writings in subsequent years indicate that he returned to a belief in spirits and, concomitantly, the survival of consciousness at death. In a letter dated February 6, 1915 to Sir Oliver Lodge, Crookes addressed a question by Lodge about a statement made years earlier. "Respecting my alleged statement that I had never had a satisfactory proof that the dead can return and communicate you must bear in mind that the quotation is from a letter said to be written by me in 1874. I do not remember much of my opinions at that date, but I have no doubt the statement was true at that early date."⁶

In 1916, Crookes stated that the phenomena he had observed "point to the existence of another order of human life continuous with this, and demonstrate the possibility in certain circumstances of communication between this work and the next."⁷

In 1917, a year after his wife's death, Crookes is said to have had a lively conversation with her at a London séance. He died in 1919 at age 86. Whether he ever again met up with Home has not been recorded.

One of the scientists who lambasted Crookes for not debunking Home and Cook was Dr. Julian Ochorowicz, professor of psychology and philosophy at the University of Warsaw and one of the founders of the Polish Psychological Institute in Warsaw. After he began investigating psychical phenomena, he changed his views. "I found I had done a great wrong to men who had proclaimed new truths at the risk of their positions," he confessed. "When I remember that I branded as a fool that fearless investigator, Crookes, the inventor of the radiometer, because he had the courage to assert the reality of psychic phenomena and to subject them to scientific tests, and when I also recollect that I used to read his articles thereon in the same stupid style, regarding him as crazy, I am ashamed, both of myself and others, and I cry from the very bottom of my heart. 'Father, I have sinned against the Light.'"⁸

Dr. Charles Richet, the 1913 Nobel Prize winner in medicine, dedicated his 1923 book, *Thirty Years of Psychical Research*, to Crookes and Frederic W. H. Myers. Like Ochorowicz, Richet initially scoffed at Crookes' findings. "...the idolatry of current ideas was so dominant at that time that no pains were taken either to verify or to refute Crookes's statements," Richet wrote. "Men were content to ridicule them, and I avow with shame that I was among the willfully blind. Instead of admiring the heroism of a recognized man of science who dare then in 1872 to say that there really are phantoms that can be photographed and whose heartbeats can be heard, I laughed. This courage had, however, no immediate or considerable effect; it is only today that Crookes's work is really understood. It is still the foundation of objective metapsychics, a block of granite that no criticism has been able to touch."⁹



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- ¹ Crookes, Sir William, *Researches into the Phenomena of Modern Spiritualism*, Austin Publishing Co., 1922, p. 13.
- ² Medhurst, R. G., *Crookes and the Spirit World*, Taplinger Publishing Co., 1972, p. 159.
- ³ _____, p. 160.
- ⁴ Crookes, p. 7.
- ⁵ Medhurst, p. 141.
- ⁶ _____, p. 241.
- ⁷ _____, p. 242.
- ⁸ Tweedale, Charles, *Man's Survival After Death*, The Psychic Book Club, London, 1925, p. 470.
- ⁹ Richet, Charles, *Thirty Years of Psychical Research*, W. Collins Sons & Co., Ltd. 1923, p. 31.