

Hester Travers Smith (1868-1949)

A resident of Dublin, Ireland, Hester Travers Smith (1868-1949) was the daughter of Professor Edward Dowden, a distinguished Shakespearian scholar, and the wife of a prominent Dublin physician. She was primarily an automatic writing and talking-board (Ouija¹) medium, sitting regularly with a small group of friends, including Lennox Robinson, a world-renowned Irish playwright, and the Rev. Savell Hicks, M.A.. Sir William Barrett, the distinguished physicist and psychical researcher, was a close personal friend and also attended a number of sittings with the group. Geraldine Cummins, perhaps the most famous automatist in history, was introduced to mediumship by Smith, who is referred to in Cummins' books by her maiden name, Hester Dowden.



In her 1919 book, *Voices from the Void*, Smith states that she had begun experimenting with automatism six or seven years earlier to see what it was all about and if it really was evidence of survival after death. She began with the belief that automatism was merely a method of study-

ing ourselves – that everything coming through the board and automatic writing was coming from the subconscious.

“Mrs. Travers Smith is not a credulous or hasty investigator; on the contrary, the trend of her mind is healthily skeptical, and hence the opinions at which she has arrived cannot be dismissed as the product of morbid curiosity or the mere will to believe,”² Sir William Barrett wrote in the Introduction to her 1919 book, *Voices from the Void*.

The usual protocol was for Smith and Robinson to sit blindfolded at the board while Hicks sat between them and copied the letters indicated by the board's “traveler.” In his 1917 book, *On The Threshold of the Unseen*, Barrett wrote of witnessing the two sitting blindfolded at the board as the traveler moved so rapidly under their hands that it was necessary to record the messages in shorthand. Although Barrett had no doubt as to the honesty and integrity of Smith and Robinson, he designed special eye patches for them to wear so that there could be no question as to them seeing where the traveler was pointing. On one occasion he turned the board around to see if the results would be the same. They were. On another occasion, to satisfy a skeptical observer, who theorized that the blindfolded operators had memorized the position of the letters on the board, the letters were rearranged and a screen was put between the two operators who remained blindfolded. Still, coherent messages came.

When Barrett asked the controlling spirit if any friend of his could send a message, he heard from a deceased friend, who sent a message to the Dublin Grand Lodge of Freemasons, of which he (the friend) had been a high ranking member.

Barrett was reasonably certain that neither of the board operators was aware of the friend's Masonic affiliation.

On another occasion, Barrett sat at the board, securely blindfolded. He reported that he was startled by the "extraordinary vigor, decision, and swiftness with which the indicator moved." The only message that came through was one that said Barrett was not suited for receiving. In other words, he did not have the mediumistic psychic power necessary to adequately receive messages.

"The gift of 'seeing without eyes' is certainly comparatively rare," Smith wrote. "I have sought diligently for mediums who possess the power of working blindfold, and find they are few in number. In fact, I have only met four out of the many I have tried who have this gift. I generally distinguish a blindfold worker by the fact that before he has had any suggestion that we should close our eyes he will close his of his own accord, and prefer to sit without looking at the letters. Blindfold sitting is very exhausting as a rule."³

Smith noted that when Mr. Robinson was not present, they experienced failure or only limited success in receiving messages. As she came to understand from her spirit controls, a "negative" and a "positive" are required for good results. "I have gathered that a "positive" medium receives the message through his or her brain and transmits it to the board, while a "negative" possesses the driving force," she explained. "I mean that, apparently, one sitter supplies mental, and the other muscular power."⁴

One of the more intriguing talking-board cases came when Geraldine Cummins, then 17, was sitting with Smith. It is referred to as the "pearl tie-pin case." The name of Cummins' cousin, an army officer killed in France a month earlier, was unexpectedly spelled out on the board and then the message came: "Tell mother to give my pearl tie-pin to the girl I was going to marry, I think she ought to have it." As Cummins was unaware that her cousin had intended

to marry and did not know the name of the woman, she asked that the name and address of the woman be given. The full Christian and surname was given on the board along with an address in London. Either the address was not accurately communicated or was taken down wrong, as a letter sent to that address was returned. Cummins checked with other family members and none was aware that the cousin had been engaged nor knew the fiancée named.

Several months later, the family of the young officer received his personal effects from the War Office. They included a pearl tie-pin along with a will naming the fiancée as his next of kin. Both the Christian and surname were exactly as given to Cummins, who would later develop into a world-famous medium and author.

Upon hearing of the case, Barrett contacted Cummins and confirmed the facts, including the fact that the message was recorded at the time and not written from memory. "Here there could be no explanation of the facts by subliminal memory, or telepathy, or collusion," Barrett wrote, "and the evidence points unmistakably to a telepathic message from the deceased officer."⁵

With automatic writing, Smith observed that the messages vary according to the communicator and that the handwriting changes as different personalities appear. "Sometimes the writing is that of a child, then of an old person, etc. One of my objections is that the script is generally difficult to decipher, as (in the nature of things) the pencil cannot be lifted as in ordinary handwriting and the [manuscript] is full of scrawls and hard to read."⁶

Smith came to the conclusion that there is more to automatism than the subliminal self. "I am convinced, in fact, that external influences of some nature work through us, using our senses, eyes, ears, brains, etc., their messages, however, being highly colored by the personalities of their mediums," she offered. "I feel sure that hardly any of the communications I have had are *entirely* due to subconsciousness."⁷

Smith was curious as to how spirits were attracted to her séance room and began asking spirit communicators what brought them there. “They state that a bright light attracted them – and the stronger the medium, the brighter the light,” she wrote. “When I am sitting myself,⁸ and ask, ‘What attracted you to this room?’ the answer generally is, ‘I saw a woman wrapped in flame.’ Sometimes they describe a brilliant light on the head of the medium, but as psychic strength increases the light seems to envelop the whole body of the sensitive.”⁹

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¹ “Although popularly known as a Ouija Board, “Ouija” is now a registered trademark of Parker Brothers..

² Smith, Hester Travers, *Voices From The Void*, E.P Dutton & Co., 1919, p. x.

³ _____, p. 108.

⁴ _____, pp. 107-108.

⁵ Barrett, Sir William, *On the Threshold of the Unseen*, E.P. Dutton & Co., 1917, pp. 184-185.

⁶ Smith, p. 8.

⁷ _____, p. 8.

⁸ [That is, when Smith attended a séance as a sitter, not as the medium. – eds.]

⁹ _____, p. 61.