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AN ANALYSIS OF SOME SUSPECT DROP-IN  
COMMUNICATIONS<sup>1</sup>

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INTRODUCTION

Mediumistic communicators who are quite unknown to medium and sitters when they first communicate have, in principle, great value for enhancing the still scanty evidence suggesting survival after death. For, although authentic and ostensibly paranormal communicators of this type—now often called drop-in communicators<sup>2</sup>—can be attributed to extrasensory perception between the medium and living persons who knew the communicator when the latter was alive, or to clairvoyant reading of printed information about the communicator, it is not easy on this “super-ESP” hypothesis to understand why and how the medium concerned should select one particular person for dramatization as a communicator instead of many others when, according to the definition of this type of case, no one present has any motive for contacting the communicator who manifests.

<sup>1</sup> We would like to thank all our many friends and colleagues who offered us help and advice in the course of our investigations, especially Nora Beloff and Clifford Makins, who visited the Isle of Wight especially so as to meet Margo and Walter and get a first-hand impression, and Renée Haynes.

We wish also to thank Emily F. Williams for assistance with research and suggestions for the improvement of this paper.

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<sup>2</sup> Communicators of this type have become known among parapsychologists as “drop-in” communicators. The phrase derived from their appearing uninvited during séances at which other, known communicators were actively sought. Most drop-in communicators manifest for only one or several séances and then come no more. At least one, however, became a regular communicator and eventually a control of the medium through whom he had first appeared as a drop-in communicator (Haraldsson and Stevenson, 1975a).

The potential importance of drop-in communicators was recognized by at least one nineteenth-century spiritualist, Stainton Moses (1874, 1875, 1902). And the early psychical researchers similarly recognized their value; F. W. H. Myers (1903) found several drop-in communicators worthy of citation and discussion.

We referred above to the requirement that communications of this type should be "authentic and ostensibly paranormal". It has not been easy to find cases satisfying these criteria. Early investigators and the successors have recognized the ease with which drop-in communicators can be faked. W. F. Prince (1919) described some of the signs of fraud for which investigators should be alert, and investigators of the SPR exposed a hoax case of the type in the 1920s (Fictitious communicator, 1924).

Self-deception appears to be an even greater hazard. The circumstances of mediumistic séances, including the operation of ouija boards and the practice of automatic writing by amateurs, may bring to the surface of the medium's mind dormant information that she or he had consciously forgotten or been unaware of acquiring. Podmore (1897) was able to show that all the correct information given by one of Stainton Moses's drop-in communicators (the case of Bertie Henry D'Oyly Jones) could have derived from an obituary notice published in the (London) *Times* six days before the communication. (This had been a case, incidentally, on which F. W. H. Myers [1895] had expended considerable effort and about which he had reached a conclusion favouring some paranormal process.) Dingwall (1921) showed that information about another of Moses's communicators, Abraham Florentine, might have derived from obituary notices published in New York. There had been sufficient time between the communicator's death and the séances at which he manifested for the newspapers to have crossed the Atlantic and somehow come under the eyes of Moses. Later, some further evidence in the case of Abraham Florentine made its interpretation as an instance of cryptomnesia less certain, although by no means excluded (Stevenson, 1965). Beginning in the late 1920s, a long series of reports about drop-in communicators was published in the *Journal* of the ASPR under the title "*Le livre des revenants*". Richmond regarded these highly enough to discuss them at some length in his *Evidence of Identity* (1939), but they received the sternest criticism from W. F. Prince (1933), who stigmatized them as obvious examples of cryptomnesia, if nothing worse.

After considering the above examples, a reader could reasonably ask why any investigator should trouble himself with cases of this type. The answer lies first in the theoretical importance of certain cases in countering the super-ESP hypothesis with which so many

otherwise excellent mediumistic communications have been attacked. And secondly, despite the mentioned weakness of many cases, others have occurred in which fraud and cryptomnesia seem highly improbable. In some of them the communicator gave information that did not exist in any written form at the time of the séance. Aksakoff's case of Anastasie Péréliguine (Myers, 1890, pp. 355-357) belongs in this group, and Murphy (1945) though well enough of it to treat it sympathetically in his review of survival evidence. We also include in this group the case of Ruth Robertshaw (Hill, 1917) and that of Runki (Haraldsson and Stevenson, 1975a). In other instances relevant newspaper reports (or other pertinent published reports) that did exist would not have accounted for all the facts communicated. The medium might have obtained some of the correct information from such a report, but would have had to obtain an important additional part from another source. Cases reported by Tyrrell (1939), Zorab (1940), and Haraldsson and Stevenson (1975b) fall into this category. In recent years one of us (I.S., alone and with Haraldsson) has published reports of cases of several drop-in communicators that seem to require the hypothesis of some paranormal process for their understanding (Stevenson, 1970, 1973; Haraldsson and Stevenson, 1975a, 1975b). Gault (1971) published a carefully investigated series of drop-in communicators about which he concluded that at least some of the information they showed could not have reached the medium through normal channels of communication.

From this brief review of the literature of the subject readers will appreciate why, when we learned of a new medium said to be capable of "bringing through" numerous drop-in communicators, we received the news with a mixture of enthusiasm and caution.

#### BRIEF HISTORY OF MARGO WILLIAMS' MEDIUMSHIP

Margo Williams said she did not think she had any unusual psychical powers until a day in April 1976 when she heard a voice say "My name is Jane", and felt an impulse to write. She described herself later as writing "furiously". "Jane" communicated a lengthy account of parts of her life and of how she died. This first communication came mostly in doggerel verse but later communications were (with rare exceptions) in prose. Thereafter, Margo Williams wrote scripts from a long succession of drop-in communicators. By the time we began to investigate the case in January 1978, she had written scripts from no less than 60 such communicators, and the number subsequently went far beyond 100. In a later phase of the mediumship the com-

communicators of the drop-in type diminished in number and they may now have ceased altogether; instead, Margo Williams wrote scripts purporting to come from discarnate spirits (ghosts) said to be durably bound to places where most of them had been, when alive, the victims or perpetrators of serious crimes. She usually wrote these scripts at the places of the supposed hauntings.

Margo Williams stated that the urge to write her scripts came to her at any time of the day, and that she usually felt obliged to drop whatever she was doing in order to yield to the communicator. The communications varied in length, but rarely exceeded 10 or 12 lines. The same communicator would return later in the day or after a few days. Two communicators might alternate in the writing of scripts over a period of some days. A particular communicator would continue with intermittent messages until he (or she) had unfolded a substantial story that typically included specific and verifiable details about the terrestrial life of the communicator. Sometimes the communicator claimed to remember two or more previous lives in a series of reincarnations.

Margo Williams said that she "heard" the communicator and transcribed the auditory messages as well as she could. She said that she could recognize various accents such as a Scottish burr or a Georgian (USA) drawl. At the same time, the handwriting of the scripts showed somewhat different characteristics, and a communicator of especially forceful character was said to have pressed the pencil Margo held deeply into the paper.

Margo Williams's husband, Walter, is a retired chemical engineer. He quickly became interested in his wife's scripts. He made legible typescripts from them and then tried to verify the communicated details as well as he could. He made extensive use of the County Branch Library in Ventnor, Isle of Wight, where the Williamses live. Margo Williams is also known to have used this library. For information not available at the Ventnor Library or obtainable through it, Walter Williams engaged in extensive correspondence with various libraries, archives and record offices.

At the conference organized by the Parascience Centre in the summer of 1977, Walter and Margo Williams presented a summary of their scripts from drop-in communicators and of their successes in verifying much of the information received up to that time. Their report was subsequently published in the Proceedings of this conference (Williams, W. and Williams, M., 1973-7). One of us (J.B.) attended the Parascience Conference in 1977, heard the Williamses' presentation, and met Mr. and Mrs. Williams. Soon afterwards J.B. wrote to I.S. about this couple, stressing their potential importance for survival research; but it was not until Walter wrote to J.B. on 28

December 1977 that the latter started to become actively involved in the case. Walter followed up his initiative by sending J.B. two cases (here a "case" means one complete set of scripts from a given communicator) for further verification. One of these was the "Anna Lyons" case, which is analysed in detail below; the other, the "Dr. Love" case, concerned a country doctor in Norfolk who flourished in the mid-nineteenth century. A further case, that of "Mistress Murray", the wife of an apothecary-surgeon of Edinburgh in the early eighteenth century, followed in April 1978. In all three cases it was possible to identify the communicator with an historical person but only, it appeared, by consulting some fairly obscure sources. The Mistress Murray case was especially impressive in this regard since the identification would not have been possible but for the help of the Keeper of Manuscripts at the University at Edinburgh, who produced a hand-written register of students belonging to Alexander Monro, the first professor of anatomy at Edinburgh University, who is mentioned in the scripts as a friend of the communicator's husband. But for this happy chance, the evaluation of this case would have had to depend solely on the authenticity of the medical details mentioned or of the linguistic peculiarities of the Scottish dialect in which it was written, and, on both these counts, there were criticisms forthcoming from the various experts whom J.B. consulted. It seemed to J.B. that, if Walter had merely intended to impress him, he would have chosen some character of Edinburgh history whose identity could more reliably have been ascertained than George Murray, an obscure apothecary-surgeon who has not so far been located in any book about the Edinburgh of that period. Consequently, when Walter suggested to him that he should write an article for the *Journal* of the SPR discussing these three particular cases, J.B. agreed and the article, entitled "The Mediumship of Margo Williams: An Analysis of Three Specimen Cases", was duly submitted to the editor in September 1978.

At this stage, J.B. still took a strongly positive view of the phenomena and argued that the evidence definitely favoured a paranormal interpretation despite the occasional lapses or incongruities that could be attributed to what he liked to call the "Margo component" of the scripts. However, misgivings continued to mount, especially after his examination of the "John Mytton" case (see below), and eventually he wrote asking the editor to withdraw the article and, at the same time, circulated a letter of explanation to the many persons who had assisted him with their expertise. Meanwhile, Walter had also been corresponding with I.S., sending him to start off with a Virginian personality, Dr. Ephraim McDowell, whose case is discussed below. Both J.B. and I.S. at different times paid a visit to

the Williamses at their home on the Isle of Wight. During this period extending through 1977-8, the Williamses produced a book that was duly accepted for publication. It was to have been called *The Moving Hand Writes*, with Margo as its author, and it contained the first 36 cases from their files with a brief discussion of each case; not all the communicators, incidentally, could be identified. However, in the end, the publishers decided against publication. In the meantime the Williamses were gaining a fair amount of media coverage both on television and in the press, and there is a favourable account of them in a recent book by Stuart Holroyd (1979).

### SOME RECURRENT FEATURES OF THE DROP-IN COMMUNICATIONS OF THIS SERIES

In addition to the 36 cases included in the book the Williamses wrote, we have examined about another 20 cases. We have also obtained at least some information about nearly all the other communications that occurred before December 1978. From examining them we discerned certain features that recurred in many of the individual cases. We shall now discuss these features, although not necessarily in order of the importance we attach to them.

The scripts are for the most part fluent, by which we mean that the communicator deploys his message with apparent effortlessness and usually with clarity. This contrasts with the jerky, halting, almost aphasic, style of most mediumistic communications.

Proper names and dates are given with apparent ease. A few names are misspelled, but we do not believe any were unrecognizable for what they were intended to be. The ease of furnishing proper names provides another contrast with what we are familiar with in the work of most mediums who have earned the confidence of investigators.

As mentioned earlier, the communicators appeared to give out what they wanted to say in a series of interrupted messages; each of which usually consisted of a paragraph or two at the most. We noted that in many of these individual messages a sentence or phrase was repeated, often at the end of the script, like the refrain of a ballad. For example, one communicator who narrated her death from drowning ended many of her messages with words like "The waves, oh, the waves". The communicator purporting to be Mary Todd Lincoln (whose scripts will be discussed later) concluded many of her messages with a phrase such as "I should have been sweeter". And among 10 scripts attributed to a highwayman, the phrase "Life is for living", or a slight variant of it, appeared in nine.

Although the communicators continued to give interrupted mess-

ages until they had said all they seemed to wish to say, it was impossible to enter into any dialogue with them. This contrasted with most other drop-in communicators, who have been held on the line, so to speak, for a short period or longer, while the sitters interrogated them and clarified doubtful elements in the messages. In fairness, we should note here that Margo Williams had no sitters in the conventional manner; she produced most of her scripts when she was alone or with her husband, Walter. And since she wrote out the messages, the communicator would often have left before she or Walter had become aware of discrepancies of details needing amplification.

A considerable number of the communicators were persons of what we should call second-rank fame. By this we mean that although their names were not household words, some record of them could be found in the *Encyclopedia Britannica* or the *Dictionary of National Biography*. Other communicators, although themselves obscure, claimed to have had some contact with eminent persons. The case of Lizzy, a maid-servant who said that she had known John Keats, falls into this category. Lizzy herself is unverified, as were a number of other communicators. Many of these unverified communicators impressed us as stock characters. They included a wealthy woman from California who owned a swimming pool and had had a child kidnapped; an Atlanta (Georgia) belle; a gypsy named Boswell; and the early nineteenth-century highwayman mentioned above.

A majority of the communicators seemed to wish to unburden themselves of guilt felt for a crime or lesser sin that they had committed when alive. They did not always state this motive explicitly, but it was nevertheless often apparent. Many of the misdeeds with which they reproached themselves might not be considered grave offences by other persons, but we will make no further judgement on this point, since different persons experience guilt in different ways; we only wish to draw attention to the high proportion of confessional elements in these communications. Some earlier reported drop-in communicators have shown this feature, but not many. A notable example is the communicator who blamed himself for having misbehaved (presumably towards other passengers) when a ship was sinking with little hope of anyone being rescued from it (Tyrrell, 1939).

The messages attributed to most of the verified communicators consisted of two parts. First, there were verifiable details of identity or of easily confirmed events in the life of the communicator. Then many of the communicators narrated some event that was not verifiable, at least in any of the sources that we consulted. The communicator usually attributed the guilt he expressed to these unverifiable incidents.

In addition to correct details, the scripts often contained errors,

and in some instances the unverified episodes just mentioned could be judged to be fictitious, or almost certainly so. It is naturally difficult to say that a particular incident could not have occurred, because those immediately concerned—even when well-known—may have succeeded in concealing the event. We have nevertheless permitted ourselves to ask whether these incidents are harmonious with facts known about the life and character of the communicator, and have often decided that they are not.

To sum up this section of our report, we noticed recurrent features in the communications alleged to come from discarnate persons, who, when alive, had markedly different personalities. We thought it unlikely that such similarities derived from a voluntary conformity on the part of the communicators, assuming that they, having survived death, had some influence on the communications. The similarities suggested to us that a large component of the final products had been added by the scriptwriter's mind, perhaps unconsciously. The effect on us was that which might be produced if the same copy editor had undertaken to "correct" the styles of such distinctive writers as Dr. Johnson, Sir Walter Scott, James Joyce and William James. If the edited works resembled each other more than they differed from each other, we would conclude that the original writers had contributed little to the final outcome. These reflections raise in us the question of whether the ostensible communicators had contributed *anything* to the communications.

It would be dishonest for us to pretend that the foregoing analysis alone had created serious doubts in our minds. At most, it made us vigilant in looking for evidence of normal sources for the communications. We think we found this in a careful examination of several of the scripts. To show how our thoughts developed towards our final conclusion we shall present in briefest summary five of the cases and then give a detailed analysis of one additional case.

## SOME ILLUSTRATIVE CASES

### EPHRAIM McDOWELL

Ephraim McDowell (1771–1830) was an American physician and surgeon (born in Virginia) who practised in the first decades of the nineteenth century in the small town of Danville, Kentucky. He attained fame by performing (in 1809) the first successful operation for the removal of an ovarian tumour in a woman, Mrs. Jane Crawford. McDowell was, from all accounts, a modest person and neither a scientist nor a scholar. It is not surprising, therefore, that he delayed

publishing an account of his operation until 1817, by which time he could add to his report of the first case some details of two additional and equally successful cases.

Margo Williams's scripts purporting to come from Ephraim McDowell correctly state the main facts about his life and his first ovariectomy. The scripts depict him, however, as feeling guilty because, on the night before his operation on Mrs. Crawford, he practised the incision he was to make on the body of a runaway Negro slave. This woman (the scripts tell us) had been beaten almost senseless by her master, had fled from him, staggered down the streets of Danville, and collapsed at the feet of McDowell. He dragged her almost lifeless body inside his house, where she soon died. McDowell then, according to the scripts, tried out the operation he had planned for Mrs. Crawford on this timely cadaver.

Fame came slowly to Ephraim McDowell, but he died full of it. Much was known about him and his daring operations before his death and much written about them after it. The operation on Mrs. Crawford took place with all the publicity of which a small backwoods town during that period in America was capable. McDowell's medical colleagues and the people of his town censured his proposed operation, and on the day of its performance a mob gathered at his house with the intention of lynching him if Mrs. Crawford died. McDowell's nephew and partner, Dr. James McDowell, refused until the last minute to assist in the operation, which he considered unimaginably reckless. McDowell thought that he would have to rely for assistance on an apprentice, Charles McKinley. At the last moment, however, James McDowell regained his nerve and his sense of loyalty and assisted his uncle. Incidentally, the script of Margo Williams makes McDowell say that *he* made the incision; but McDowell, just before they began, requested his nephew to make the opening incision, which he did, and McDowell then took over and completed the operation with his nephew's assistance (Gross, 1861, p. 219). Mrs. Crawford was lodged in McDowell's own house just before the operation and until she had recovered sufficiently to return to her home, 60 miles away.

McDowell prepared himself thoroughly for the operation and rehearsed it carefully with his apprentice during the days when his nephew was defecting. In the several accounts of the operation that we have studied (Gross, 1861; Sabiston, 1975), including McDowell's (Schachner, 1921) own report of it, we found no hint of his having practised on the cadaver of a woman before he operated on Mrs. Crawford. There are at least two strong reasons for believing that no such practising ever occurred. First, the surveillance of McDowell by angry opponents of his proposed operation would have made it

almost impossible for him to have practised on a cadaver without this fact being known and subsequently revealed. Secondly, practice on a woman with a normal abdomen would have provided no substantial assistance in preparing for an operation on a woman whose organs had become displaced and distorted by an enormous ovarian tumour.

It is worth adding also that McDowell's dying words were recorded verbatim and published in a biography of him written by his granddaughter (Valentine, 1894). He died with all the appearance of a man having a clear conscience. We cannot exclude the possibility that, if we survive death, we may blame ourselves for actions that we thought harmless when we were alive; we therefore attach less importance to the record of McDowell's last words than to the other reasons mentioned for believing that he had not carried out a practice operation on the body of a runaway Negro slave.

#### JOHN MYTTON

John Mytton (1796–1834) was a wealthy squire and sportsman of Shropshire whose recklessness and other eccentricities earned him the nickname of "Mad Mytton". He eventually spent a huge fortune and died in a debtors' prison.

Margo Williams's script purporting to come from Mad Mytton mentions some of his well-known feats, such as hunting wild duck when stark naked. The scripts, however, also mention an escapade that most probably never occurred. In them he states that he ran down the street with his hat on fire just to frighten women who would see him. Mytton did once set fire to his own nightshirt (while he was wearing it) in an effort to break up an attack of hiccoughs, but we have found no record of his having run through the street with his hat on fire. If he had done so, the fact would surely have been recorded along with his other escapades by his close friend, C. J. Apperley, who, under the pseudonym of Nimrod, wrote a biography of Mytton published three years after Mytton's death (Apperley, 1837).

Margo Williams's scripts, however, make a worse mistake. They depict Mytton as cold and selfish. The Mytton communicator claims that he disdained to help a friend who, being in a debtors' prison, sent Mytton a plea for help. Apperley records no such episode and it is in the highest degree improbable. Mytton's fault, if he had any apart from his generally harmless eccentricities, were excessive generosity. So far was he from ignoring friends who had debts that he ended his own days as a debtor in prison because he had helped his friends and tenants so lavishly.

Edith Sitwell devotes several pages to Mytton in her *English Eccentrics (1933/1971)*. Her brief account describes some of his wild

adventures, but gives little information about his deeper feelings and attitudes towards his friends. We think that it may have provided the source for the correct facts about Mytton's life that Margo Williams's scripts included. Two copies of this book are stocked in branch libraries of the Isle of Wight, and it is also available in a Penguin paperback edition. To these the scriptwriter appears to have added a fictitious episode and a completely erroneous delineation of Mytton's character with regard to his friends.

#### LIZZY

The case of the maidservant "Lizzy" is of interest for a variety of reasons. She was the only one of the drop-in communicators to hail from the Isle of Wight and the only one that Margo claimed to have seen as an apparition (three times). But, chiefly, the case is of interest because it purports to reveal certain unpublished lines written by the poet John Keats. The simple tale that the scripts relate is that, to console herself for the unrequited love she felt for the poet, then staying on the island with his friend James Rice, she stole some pages from his notebook. Her subsequent remorse provides the pretext for the communication. Since nothing whatever is known about Lizzy herself, not even her surname, and the few particulars about Keats can all be found in standard biographies such as the recent one by Robert Gittings (1968/1971, see p. 474), the evaluation of the case rests on the authentication of the lines attributed to Keats. Some of these are prose extracts from the alleged notebook; others, which form part of an "Ode to a Wave" on which he was supposed to be working, are rapid, witless lines, which, though they use a roughly Keatsian vocabulary, could not conceivably be the authentic work of one of the greatest poets of the English language, quite apart from a twice perpetrated grammatical error. For all that, Margo insists that she had never even heard of John Keats before Lizzy's intervention!

#### MARY TODD LINCOLN

Whereas the scripts purporting to come from Mad Mytton have the main facts about him correct, but give a wrong characterization, those attributed to Mary Todd Lincoln show her character accurately enough, but include some major errors of fact.

According to Margo Williams's scripts, the communicator Mary Todd Lincoln (wife of President Abraham Lincoln) repents of her bad temper, and, as we mentioned earlier, the separate paragraphs of her messages frequently include a self-reproach, such as "I should have been sweeter". So far so good. Even her most friendly biographers

agree that Mary Todd Lincoln was a termagant whose notorious outbursts of temper saddened her husband and terrified many less imperturbable persons. Her inordinate ambition, her fondness for elegant clothes, and her rather paranoid attitude towards mishaps, are also correctly depicted in the scripts. But all this, as well as the many accurate facts included in the scripts, is common knowledge easily accessible to anyone who studies the life of Abraham Lincoln.

The scripts, however, also include some egregious errors. Lincoln is said to have discussed the famous Gettysburg Address with his wife *before* he delivered it. This is in the highest degree improbable. Lincoln's speech became one of the most famous of all utterances in the English language. Its merits were recognized slowly, but when they were, numerous memoirists and historians recorded their recollections of Lincoln's preparations for the speech. Although these accounts differed markedly, none of them mentioned that he reviewed the speech with his wife before delivering it. Since Mrs. Lincoln was at that time intensely preoccupied with the illness of the Lincolns' son Tad, it is unlikely that her husband would have troubled her with listening to his speech or that she could have paid attention if he had. One of Mary Todd Lincoln's biographers asserts dogmatically that Lincoln "had not given her any inkling of what he intended to say that day" (Ross, 1973).

The scripts refer to Lincoln's having been "upset" by General Meade. This is correct, since Lincoln was vexed that Meade did not aggressively pursue the retreating Confederates after he had defeated them at the Battle of Gettysburg. The scripts then state that Lincoln replaced Meade, "and then there was more trouble and yet another took over". This is wrong. Lincoln appointed Grant Commander-in-Chief above Meade, but Grant retained Meade as commanding general of the Army of the Potomac; neither Grant nor Meade was later superseded.

Lincoln had a morbid, although in the event not unjustified, concern about being assassinated. He received numerous threatening letters and kept them in an envelope on which he had written the word "Assassination". Towards the end of his life, Lincoln remarked (after receiving yet another threat) that he had kept 80 such threatening notes and letters in his file (Sandburg, 1939, vol. 4, p. 242). In the scripts of Margo Williams we are told that there were 80 *attempts* on Lincoln's life. In fact, there was only *one* attempt to assassinate him before John Wilkes Booth killed him in April 1865. And even this incident, which occurred in 1862, was possibly an accident. A shot was fired at Lincoln as he was riding. Lincoln was inclined to dismiss the incident as only careless shooting by someone who was out hunting.

It is relevant to note that a book on assassinations (Windor, 1975) that one of us (I.S.) examined in the County Branch Library of Ventnor makes the same error as the scripts. It incorrectly states that there were 82 (not 80) *attempts* on Lincoln's life, whereas there were really only 81 *threats* to his life.

The Mary Todd Lincoln scripts, like so many of Margo Williams's communications, mention an episode about which the communicator feels guilty. (This is apart from the diffuse self-reproaches for bad temper.) She claims to have read and then destroyed a special dispatch concerned with the war which, if her husband had seen it, could have "ended the war one or two weeks before it did". It is extremely unlikely that Mary Todd Lincoln ever destroyed a dispatch to her husband at this period of the American Civil War, or at any other time. We can add, however, that even if she had done so at the end of March 1865, this would have changed nothing in the course of the war. Although Lincoln had earlier taken an active part in directing the war in military as well as in civil matters, once he had found that Grant was an able general he gave him a free hand. By March 1865 the final Union victory was seen as inevitable by almost everyone on both sides of the conflict. It ended effectively with the surrender of the southern General Lee to General Grant on 9 April 1865. During the last few weeks Lincoln did nothing, and could have done nothing, that would have either prolonged or shortened the war by one or two weeks.

#### ALEXANDER MOUBRAY

Margo Williams's scripts about Alexander Moubray (or Mowbray, as the scripts spelled it) depict him as an agent for an eighteenth-century merchant ship, the *Betty*, sailing (from Scotland) to America with cargo and passengers. The scripts give the name of the communicator and of his ship as well as other details. All these are found in *Glasgow* (Daiches, 1977), which is in the collection of the County Branch Library at Ventnor. Daiches's book is a short, popular history of Glasgow, and it reproduces (on p. 49) the following advertisement printed in the *Glasgow Mercury* in 1784:

For PHILADELPHIA,

The Brigantine BETTY and MATTY, Archd. Moor, Master, a stout new vessel, has good accommodation for passengers, and will sail positively on or before the 20th of May instant, wind and weather serving.

For passage apply to Messrs. Alexander Moubray, Edinburgh, William Donald, Glasgow, and John Stewart, Greenock

In addition to the above verified facts, the scripts attributed to

Alexander Moubray depict him as feeling guilty because of his ambitious scheming to become sole owner of the ship. We have not obtained additional information about Alexander Moubray. There is therefore no verification of the plotting to obtain control of the ship included in the scripts. This feature provides another illustration of unverified (and probably unverifiable) incidents about which the communicator repents.

Margo and Walter Williams said that they made some effort to verify the existence of the *Betty*—the scripts gave only part of the full name—by consulting records of merchant ships of the period, but were unsuccessful. Then one day they were in the County Branch Library of Ventnor when Margo felt an irresistible urge to pick up Daiches's book about Glasgow. She did so and said she was astonished to find in it the verification she and Walter had been seeking for the communication from Alexander Moubray. Since she and Walter were often in the library, many readers will think that she had seen Daiches's book before that particular occasion.

#### THE SCRIPTS FROM "ANNA LYONS"

The communicator was the daughter of Sir Edmund Lyons, later Vice-Admiral Lord Lyons (1790–1858), a notable naval hero and diplomat of the first half of the nineteenth century. Lyons was British Minister in Athens from 1835 to 1849 during the reign of King Otho. He rates a mention both in the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* and the *Dictionary of National Biography*. The brief article about Lyons in the former work refers readers to the *Life of Vice-Admiral Edmund, Lord Lyons* by Capt. S. Eardley-Wilmot (1898). Although this is primarily a work of naval history, it occasionally refers to Lyons's domestic life. On pages 81–84 Eardley-Wilmot describes the marriages of Lyons's daughters, Annie and Minna, both of which took place in 1839. These few pages provide verifications of all the correct details included in the scripts.

The scripts, however, give the communicator's name as "Anna", whereas Eardley-Wilmot gave it as "Annie". Since Annie Lyons had married a German and had later lived in Germany, it was natural to assume that she had perhaps adopted, after her marriage, the German style of "Anna". This point seemed worth confirming and one of us (I.S.) on a visit to Munich sought to verify this and other details by consulting available works in the Staatsbibliothek of that city. By far the most useful of these was an extremely detailed history of the von Würzburg family (Hotzelt, 1931) the author of which had written his book with full access to the family papers. Fourteen pages are devoted to Philipp von Würzburg, his wife Annie Lyons, and his father-in-

law, Lord Lyons. We also obtained some subsidiary background information about the court of King Otho from other works (Bower and Bolitho, 1939; Herzberg, 1879).

The first point to emerge from a study of Hotzelt's work was that Annie Lyons preserved the English form of her name until her death. Indeed, her granddaughter, who gave distinguished nursing service on the German side during World War I, was named Annie after her.

The scripts show other errors. They state that Annie Lyons met her future husband, Philipp von Würzburg, *after* Annie's younger sister, Minna, had met her future husband. This is incorrect. Annie and Philipp had been in love for several years before Lord Fitzalan (later Duke of Norfolk) came to Athens, met Minna, and proposed to her. Minna, however, was married before Annie, and Eardley-Wilmot describes their weddings in chronological order. A reader with no other information might easily infer, from reading Eardley-Wilmot alone, that the chronological order of acquaintance between the two daughters and their future husbands corresponds to the order of their weddings.

The scripts depict Annie as nagging her mother to give permission for her to marry Philipp von Würzburg *after* Minna's wedding. Annie certainly had nagged her mother to permit her to marry Philipp von Würzburg, but her parents had consented to her marriage as early as February 1839, several months before Minna's wedding in June of that year. Annie's marriage then needed the additional approval of Philipp's parents, who lived in Bavaria. Protracted negotiations between the families ensued and were made more difficult by the bad postal service between Greece and Bavaria. During the associated delays in arranging for Annie's marriage, Lady Lyons returned to London with Minna, whose marriage therefore took place first, in June 1839.

The scripts state that Annie Lyons's parents opposed her marrying Philipp von Würzburg because he was a foreigner. Eardley-Wilmot gives the same reasons, but there are grounds for doubting that Philipp's being a foreigner played any part in the opposition of Lord and Lady Lyons to Annie's marriage to him. Eardley-Wilmot wrote his book just a few years after Annie's death in 1894, and probably Philipp von Würzburg was still alive when the book was drafted (Philipp died in 1897 and Eardley-Wilmot's book was published in 1898.) Eardley-Wilmot may have tactfully suppressed the real reasons for the parental opposition to Annie's marriage, if he knew them. Hotzelt agrees that Annie's parents did oppose her marriage to Philipp and mentions that at one stage they actually forbade the couple to see each other. But Hotzelt says nothing about opposition to the marriage on the grounds of Philipp's being a foreigner. Since he



wrote 30 years after Eardley-Wilmot he may have felt justified in greater candour. Be that as it may, he mentions details about Philipp that could much better account for the opposition of Annie's parents to her marrying him than his being a foreigner. Philipp was a gambler and chronically out of funds. He was a second son with few prospects of inheritance. His promotion (in the Bavarian troops King Otho maintained in Greece) came slowly, and the outlook for the entire Bavarian entourage was dismal; eventually, King Otho had to discharge his Bavarian ministers and nearly all his Bavarian soldiers, so that he was left with only a handful of household retainers. And finally, Philipp was a friend, as well as *aide-de-camp*, of King Otho. Sir Edmund Lyons and King Otho disagreed on matters of policy. Their personal relations were inharmonious, to put it mildly, and King Otho at one point tried to have Lyons recalled by the British government. It is quite likely that Sir Edmund Lyons and his wife found the idea of their daughter marrying a close associate of King Otho uncongenial. There was also concern on the part of both Annie's and Philipp's parents about the difference in their religions and about the question of the religion in which their children would be brought up. But these religious difficulties appear to have arisen at a later stage in the negotiations and do not seem to have been a main cause for the earlier opposition of Annie's parents to the proposed marriage. In short, it seems likely that the reason for the parental opposition to Annie's marriage was the judgement of her parents that Philipp was at best a young man with poor prospects of advancement and at worst an unworthy adventurer.

The scriptwriter describes the wedding of Annie Lyons and Philipp von Würzburg as "the grandest of all times" and as "the most wonderful wedding ever held". This theme becomes elaborated by references to the resplendent uniform of Annie's father at the wedding and to Annie's gown, which was "the loveliest ever created". There was, however, no grand wedding. The wedding took place on 24 December 1839 in the residence of the British Minister with only a small circle of family and friends present (Hotzelt, 1931, p. 715).

The script states that the King and Queen of Greece were invited to the wedding. It implies, without explicitly stating, that the King and Queen attended the wedding. It is unlikely that the King and Queen were invited, first because it was a small private wedding and secondly because of the bad relations between Sir Edmund Lyons and King Otho. It is even more unlikely that the King, if he had been invited, actually attended. Philipp wrote a letter home about the wedding. His biographer (Hotzelt, 1931, p. 715) mentions the main themes of this letter—the religious services, the wedding gifts, and where the newlywed couple spent their honeymoon—but there is no

mention of King Otho being invited to the wedding or attending it. It is conceivable that Philipp mentioned such details in his letter home and that the biographer did not refer to them, but this seems unlikely. Certainly if the King had been invited and not attended, Philipp would have been offended, as would Sir Edmund Lyons, and he would surely have mentioned this to his parents.

The foregoing catalogue of errors in the scripts does not exhaust the details in them that caught our attention. We have already mentioned two matters in which the scripts make statements inferable from what Eardley-Wilmot wrote. These are the reference to Philipp's foreignness and the chronological order of the meetings between the Lyons daughters and their future husbands. In some other respects also, the scripts show a curious correspondence with Eardley-Wilmot. We shall mention three more details. First, the scripts state that Annie's younger sister, Minna, married "the son of the Earl of Surrey". Minna's husband was Lord Fitzalan in 1839. He was the son of the Earl of Surrey and grandson of the Duke of Norfolk. Eardley-Wilmot correctly describes him in these terms for the year 1839. But Lord Fitzalan succeeded his father as Earl of Surrey in 1842, less than three years after his marriage, and he became the fourteenth Duke of Norfolk in 1856. The scripts thus depict him according to his status in 1839 without regard to the fact that before Annie died in 1894, and for much the longest period of her remaining life, he had two other titles.

Secondly, the scripts give the name of Annie Lyons's husband as "Baron Philip de Wurtzburg". So does Eardley-Wilmot, who followed the custom of the nineteenth century, and especially of the diplomatic services at that time; French was then the international language that English has since become. But German was also an important language, then as now. And we could expect that Annie's husband would, as a German, call himself Philipp Freiherr von Würzburg. (Note the two p's in the German spelling of Philip's name.) We have a right to expect that Annie von Würzburg, as Annie Lyons became and remained after her marriage throughout the rest of her long life, would remember her husband in the German style, not the French one.

Thirdly, the communicator gives us the exact month of Minna's wedding, "June 1839", but about her own wedding states only that it occurred "towards the end of 1839". This corresponds closely to Eardley-Wilmot's text. He stated that Minna's marriage to Lord Fitzalan took place on 19 June, whereas Annie's marriage took place only "at the end of the year". (1839 is to be clearly understood in both instances.) We consider it exceedingly strange that a communicator should remember the exact month of her sister's wedding and be vague about that of her own.

It remains to draw attention to one further feature of the scripts purporting to come from Annie Lyons. This is that they are entirely focused on a period of less than a year (1839) in the life of a person who lived to a venerable age. After Annie Lyons's wedding in 1839, she lived for over half a century more, and her life was filled with numerous events that must, we feel, have left a strong impression on the mind and memories of the living Annie Lyons. Granted that women attach more importance to their own weddings (and those of other members of their families) than do men, is it reasonable to expect that any one woman's memories, if she survived death, would concentrate so narrowly on the events of one year and neglect equally stirring events that happened in other years of a long life?

To sum up, we found that everything correct in the scripts said to come from Annie Lyons could be found in Eardley-Wilmot's life of Lord Lyons. The scripts in certain important details show a close correspondence with usages and details of content found within the space of four pages in Eardley-Wilmot. They also include several additional details not found in Eardley-Wilmot that are either definitely, wrong or almost certainly so. If we add that, although no copy of Eardley-Wilmot's biography of Lord Lyons is available in the public libraries of the Isle of Wight, a copy is available in the nearby library of the Naval Collection at the New Central Library, Portsmouth, we think few readers will fail to agree with us that the communications said to come from Annie (or Anna) Lyons must have derived from Eardley-Wilmot's biography. We believe information contained on pages 81-84 of this book was somehow conveyed normally to Margo Williams. The scriptwriting intelligence, whatever that may have been, embellished the somewhat meagre descriptions given by Eardley-Wilmot with dramatic details that were implausible or definitely wrong.

## DISCUSSION

We think that we have shown that the correct details in the scripts attributed to John Mytton, Alexander Moubray (or Mowbray), and Annie (or Anna) Lyons derived from information available in specific books. We have not identified specific books as the sources for the communications attributed to Ephraim McDowell, "Lizzy" and Mary Todd Lincoln. In these cases, however, ample sources for the verifiable facts were available to the automatist and her husband, and we can think of individual books that *might* have been the sources for each of these communications. It is unnecessary, however, to attribute these scripts to any particular book in order to feel confident that

they also derived from some normal and accessible source or sources of information about the communicators. Although we are not able to say how the normally acquired information reached the mind of Margo Williams (or, to put the matter precisely, came to our attention in the typescripts submitted for examination by Walter Williams), we do not think that our ignorance on this point invalidates our main conclusion. Although we have confined this report to a discussion of a small number of cases in the total *oeuvre* of Margo Williams we have also examined some others closely and they do not affect our main conclusion. Accordingly, unless and until we are provided with some evidence that Mrs. Williams really did acquire some information paranormally, we find ourselves unable to regard her scripts as being of interest to parapsychologists.

## SOME INDICIA OF NORMAL PROCESSES OF COMMUNICATION

Having described cases in which normal processes of communication seem the obvious explanation, readers may expect us to provide something like a pilot's chart of shoals that will keep future investigators from running aground. We shrink from such an ambitious undertaking, but will nevertheless offer some comments for guidance.

—First, we will remind readers of the recurrent features found in the whole series of communicators of this one medium. Sensitive observers of human behaviour agree that the differences between human personalities are at least as great as their similarities. When, therefore, a variety of different communicators show great similarities of themes and styles, this should alert us to the possibility of a substantial contribution to the communications from the mind of the medium.

Secondly, unverifiable material and mistakes (or probable errors) in communications should suggest the possibility that the medium has (perhaps unconsciously) embellished narrations that may, in the main, be accurate. Evidence of such adornment, however, should raise the question of whether the whole, not just a part, of the communication may be derived from a normal source, or be invented.

Thirdly, errors in scripts that repeat those found in printed sources, or that rather obviously derive from inferences based on printed sources (as in the scripts attributed to Annie Lyons), should warn us that the correct information in the scripts was probably also derived normally from those sources.

Fourthly, we should be suspicious of mediumistic communications

that differ markedly in characteristics from other, seemingly reliable, communications. In the present case, the drop-in communicators of Margo Williams showed a much greater fluency and greater facility with proper names and dates than the communicators of most other mediums. At the same time, there was no dialogue with them as there is with the usual mediumistic communicators.

Some persons inclined from other evidence to believe in survival after death may think our standards too high. They may ask what allowance we have made for the continuation of human fallibility after death. Why should we expect that a person who made mistakes when he was alive should cease to do so after he died? Surely a communicator can be allowed to mix up some facts of his terrestrial life without being totally discredited. Such persons may also remind us that some of Mrs. Piper's controls, for example, Dr. Phinuit and the Imperator band, failed to give satisfactory accounts of their earthly lives; and yet Mrs. Piper enjoys a high standing among mediums who are thought to have provided important evidence of survival after death. To this we would reply that the evidence for paranormal processes in the mediumship of Mrs. Piper does not rest on a belief in the autonomy of Mrs. Piper's controls, but on evidence, quite independent of their ontological status, that she really had acquired some information paranormally. This evidence was found particularly in her contributions to the cross-correspondences but also in the communications from "G.P." through her. Of this type of evidence, we have found none and learned of none in the mediumship of Margo Williams.

*For reasons of copyright we are unable to quote from the scripts concerned.*

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