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## Capturing the will: Imposture, delusion, and exposure in Alfred Russel Wallace's defence of spirit photography



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### ABSTRACT

The co-discoverer of natural selection, Alfred Russel Wallace, found himself deeply embroiled in a range of controversies surrounding the relationship between science and spiritualism. At the heart of these controversies lay a crisis of evidence in cases of delusion or imposture. He had the chance to observe the many epistemic impasses brought about by this crisis while participating in the trial of the American medium Henry Slade, and through his exchanges with the physiologist William Benjamin Carpenter and the psychical researcher Frederic Myers. These contexts help to explain the increasing value that Wallace placed on the evidence of spirit photography. He hoped that it could simultaneously break these impasses, while answering once and for all the interconnected questions of the unity of the psyche and the reliability of human observation.

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### 1. Introduction

Spiritualism in the late nineteenth century was neither a purely secular nor traditionally religious movement. As such, it threatened both the old guard of the Anglican establishment and the newly emerging body of scientific professionals. Both groups accused spiritualists of being either victims of delusion or participants in some underhanded imposture. The charge of delusion implied that spiritualists were either mentally unsound or ill-equipped to assess the evidence presented to them. If spiritualism was dismissed as imposture, this was also treated as the fault of the spiritualists. They were charged with gullibility for their willingness to be taken in by the skill of some cunning operator who could deceive through a combination of mechanism, sleight of hand, and suggestion. Believing that scientific professionals ought to know better than to be taken in by such 'idols,' the British physiologist Dr. William Benjamin Carpenter (1813–1885) chided his colleagues who defending spiritualist claims. He observed that:

Men like Mr. Crookes, Mr. Varley, and Professor Barrett seem to me to resemble Baron Reichenbach [...] and other Physicists, twenty-five years back, in their ignorance of *the nature of their instruments of research*; putting as much faith in tricky girls or women, as they do in their thermometers or electroscopes.<sup>1</sup>

These 'instruments of research,' however, were exactly what were in question. The reliability of the mind and the evidence provided through the use of instruments were major points of contention when both spiritualists and their opponents attempted to demonstrate just who was deluded and who was being duped.

Amongst the spiritualists to take up this challenge, few were as high-profile and controversial as the naturalist Alfred Russel Wallace (1823–1913). From 1866 until his death, Wallace publicly defended the validity of spiritualist research against many of his former allies, including Carpenter, the physicist John Tyndall (1820–1893), Thomas Henry Huxley (1825–1895), and Huxley's student, the zoologist Edwin Ray Lankester (1847–1929).<sup>2</sup> In this defence, Wallace sought to overcome a series of seemingly paralyzing

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<sup>1</sup> Carpenter (1876, pp. 1281–1282).

<sup>2</sup> Pels (1995, p. 74). See also: Wallace (1866).

epistemic challenges put forward by his opponents. In 1876, his views on spiritualism formed the background of the trial of the American medium Henry Slade (1835–1905). The trial also made a public spectacle of the impasses facing spiritualism. It became increasingly clear both inside and outside the courtroom that when it came to questions of imposture, opponents of spiritualism could argue that in the absence of positive proof, the ability to mechanically replicate the phenomena according to the generally accepted laws of nature was enough to demonstrate the intent of the medium to deceive. Accusations of delusion were more difficult to address because they did not question the honesty of spiritualists so much as they questioned the more fundamental belief that the human psyche was capable of bearing reliable witness to its own experiences. Wallace was troubled by the idea of a subliminal or second self, which the psychical researcher Frederic Myers (1843–1901) had proposed as an alternative explanation for spiritual possession. He was also concerned about Carpenter's critiques, which were based on dominant ideas and unconscious cerebration. Together, Wallace's concerns about mind and mechanism help to shed a new light on a little-studied aspect of his thought: his staunch support for the evidence of spirit photography, which he held to be 'the most perfect scientific test of the reality of [spiritualist] phenomena you can possibly have.'<sup>3</sup>

At first glance, Wallace's emphasis on spirit photography seems to fall within what Lorraine Daston and Peter Galison have described as mechanical objectivity. This was the view that true objectivity was achievable only when one could repeatedly represent nature with as little human intervention as possible, with all of its peculiarities and asymmetries intact.<sup>4</sup> Spirit photography provided Wallace with a way to address charges of imposture by appealing to the same set of values that saw the rise of mechanical objectivity. However, rather than discounting the reliability of the individual, Wallace came to see spirit photography as a tool for vindicating, not negating, the actions of coherent, individual wills. In this way he countered charges of delusion by showing the coherence and independence of the will of both disembodied intelligences and of the mediums through whom they were revealed. The importance he placed on spirit photography thus drew from many of the same values as mechanical objectivity, but it did so in order to demonstrate the efficacy and coherence of the human will, psyche, or spirit. Spirit photography was thus a spiritual technology.<sup>5</sup>

While several other studies have explored Wallace's spiritualism, his involvement in the Slade trial, and his debates with Carpenter, this study will explore how his attempts to address charges of both delusion and imposture converged in his defence of spirit photography.<sup>6</sup> Beginning with a brief introduction to spiritualism in the nineteenth century, this paper will move on to an account of the Slade Trial, which vividly portrayed the challenges facing Wallace's defence of spiritualism in the face of accusations of imposture. It will then examine the ways in which Wallace believed that emerging views of

the unconscious challenged not only the validity of spiritualist claims, but also the very foundations of knowledge upon which science itself was based, and how he sought to address these concerns. The final section of the paper will address how spirit photography resolved, to Wallace's satisfaction, the difficult epistemic challenges levelled against him by his adversaries.

## 2. Mechanical trial and error

The birth of nineteenth century spiritualism is said to have taken place in New York State in 1848 when two sisters from Ontario, Kate Fox (1837–1892) and Margaret Fox (1833–1893), began to receive communications from spirits in the form of coded rapping on a table.<sup>7</sup> Within ten years, mediums had begun to appear throughout Europe and North America. Throughout much of the century, British spiritualism was generally considered an American import; even mediums from the United Kingdom who had spent some time in America, such as the celebrated Daniel Douglas Home (1833–1886), were seen as more American upon their return.<sup>8</sup>

Along with the attention given to spiritualism as a new spiritual path came intense scrutiny from religious and secular authorities and, eventually, even some consideration by the British Association for the Advancement of Science (BAAS). On September 12th, 1876, the physicist Sir William Fletcher Barrett (1844–1925) presented a paper during the meeting of the Anthropological Division of the BAAS, entitled 'On abnormal conditions of mind'.<sup>9</sup> It dealt with issues surrounding mesmerism, somnambulism, telepathy, and spiritualism. Wallace, the speaker and then-president of the biological section of the society, had sponsored it despite criticisms from some of his fellow members. During the discussion, Wallace's opponents were quick to raise the question of whether spiritual phenomena could be repeated. They challenged the physicist William Crookes (1832–1919), who was sympathetic to some spiritualist claims, to provide the kind of experimental proof that he had provided for his earlier claims about electricity.<sup>10</sup> Wallace and his supporters argued that this had already been done, and singled out the work of Dr. Henry Slade (1835–1905), an American medium who had recently come to England.<sup>11</sup> Slade's spiritual manifestations most often took the form of spirit writings performed by his deceased wife, Allie. According to Slade, Allie could facilitate communication with other spirits by writing answers to questions asked of her when he held a piece of slate and chalk against the underside of a table. Wallace had sat with Slade and Slade's assistant, Geoffrey Simmonds, on at least three occasions and had been satisfied with what he had witnessed. Others, however, were not so convinced.<sup>12</sup>

Though not present at the September 12th meeting, the zoologist Edwin Ray Lankester was outraged to hear of the introduction of spiritualism into the BAAS and hoped to humiliate Wallace by revealing Slade as an impostor.<sup>13</sup> In the September 16th 1876 edition of the *Times*, he publicly denounced Slade as a fraud. Lankester

<sup>3</sup> Wallace (1887, p. 3531).

<sup>4</sup> Daston & Galison (2007, p. 20). See also: Daston & Galison (1992).

<sup>5</sup> Balfour Stewart's and Peter Guthrie Tait's attempts to use thermodynamics to demonstrate the immortality of the soul, as well as nineteenth century attempts to measure and quantify the efficacy of prayer, and of psychic healing, could also be described as employing spiritual technologies. See: Stewart & Tait (1875) and Heimann (1972).

<sup>6</sup> For more on Wallace's spiritualism see Keezer (1965), Durant (1979), Kottler (1974), and Pels (1995), as well as the biographies of Wallace by Shermer (2002), Slotten (2004), and Fichman (2004). For a discussion of Wallace's involvement in the Slade trial, see: Milner (1990, 1994, pp. 107–121, 1996). For an excellent discussion of Wallace's moral attraction to spiritualism, see Turner (1974, pp. 79–122).

<sup>7</sup> McMullin (2004, pp. 22–23).

<sup>8</sup> Oppenheim (1988, pp. 11–12). For more background on the debates surrounding spiritualism see Oppenheim (1988), McMullin (2004), and Owen (1989, 2004). For more on Frederic Myers's interest in spiritualism, see Hamilton (2009), and for a recent study of the most prominent Victorian medium, D. D. Home, see Lamont (2005). For more on Lamont's psychologization of the historical debates surrounding spiritualism and related phenomena, see Lamont (2013). The debates in Germany are covered in Sawiki (2002), Treitel (2004), and Wolfram (2009). For a parallel case study of the difficult epistemic questions facing attempts to 'close' debate on psychical research from 1920 to the end of the 1930s, see Mauskopf & McVaugh (1980).

<sup>9</sup> Barrett would go on to co-found the London Society for Psychical Research (SPR).

<sup>10</sup> Slotten (2004, p. 335).

<sup>11</sup> Slotten (2004, pp. 332, 336).

<sup>12</sup> Anonymous (1876, pp. 161–164).

<sup>13</sup> Slotten (2004, p. 338).

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