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Journalist, agricultural administrator, magazine editor and farmer. A member of the Council of the Society for Psychical Research for 55 years, chairman of its Image and Publicity Committee and secretary of its Survival Research Committee, he was principal investigator of the Scole Group of physical mediums, and author of the Scole Report, published in the Proceedings of the SPR (Vol 54 Pt 220) in 1999 with his co-investigators Professors Arthur Ellison and David Fontana.

What will the Critics Accept as Evidence?**- Montague Keen -**

TWO YEARS have elapsed since the publication of Grant and Jane Solomon's *The Scole Experiment*, and the heavyweight tome *The Scole Report* published by the Society for Psychical Research: long enough, one would think, to be able to assess what impact they have had now that the dust has settled, and to note how far the claims made by or on behalf of the Scole Group and their investigators have withstood time's test.

You will recall the strange episode of the dog that failed to bark in the night, leading Sherlock Holmes to sniffle out a canine clue to some dastardly deed: well, this goes for Scole too, The debates which followed publication of our Report concentrated almost exclusively on the authenticity of the phenomena. This is what we had neither wished nor planned.

Long before the end of our unexpectedly truncated series of sittings between 1995 and 1997, it had become clear to all three principal investigators, and associated co-investigators like Dr Hans Schaer and Walter and Karen Schnittger, that fraud or unconscious deception was not an option. It followed that we ought to concentrate on the really important issues. These were an evaluation of the theory that all could be explained either by some extended form of the so-called super-psi hypothesis, which attributes everything to the activities of the human psyche, individual or collective; or else to some form of discarnate intelligences.

To most readers of the *Spiritual Scientist*, for whom the presence and influence of spirit personalities are as real as their morning porridge, this may be an irritatingly pointless issue. But it remains true that the world beyond the séance room and the spiritualists' meeting place remains positively hostile to the evidence.

For many believers, this is a matter of indifference. They have found the truth as it appears to them; they have discovered a source of assurance, comfort, guidance and help which less fortunate or more purblind folk have denied themselves, and are content to cultivate their own garden and not seek to proselytise, or even protest.

That was the view strongly expressed six or seven years ago by the Noah's Ark Society. The resistance to investigation by those seeking to intrude into their private séances was both widespread and perfectly understandable. However, to those of us cursed with insatiable curiosity, and angry at the manner in which the scientific establishment cold-shoulders evidence it finds inconvenient or disturbing, there is a strong commitment to take the battle into the public domain. That is one of the reasons why the Scole Group were at once so courageous and so rare. They and their spirit guides felt an obligation to their fellow human beings, which stretched well beyond their own private lives and personal comfort.

I have been in as good a position as anyone to appraise the aftermath of *The Scole Report*. Its contents have been extensively reviewed, albeit not in the columns of the scientific press or in respected broadsheets. But the sceptics have certainly had every opportunity and incentive to undermine our findings by producing evidence, no matter how circumstantial or flimsy, that we were all taken in. The journalist able to unearth a damning piece of evidence of deception, at any stage, time, place or circumstance, would have surely made it to the front pages, and secured an honoured place for himself in the annals of fraud exposure.

But what has happened matches the behaviour of Sherlock's hound: silence. Hundreds of people attended sittings in half a dozen countries over several years, not just in the village of Scole. Not one has come forward to support any of the critics. On the contrary, no single piece of evidence which has come my way has done anything to undermine the integrity of the Scole Group or the authenticity of the evidence of that astonishing range of physical phenomena - a range without precedent in the history of spirit manifestations.

This is all the more remarkable because I have gone out of my way to invite such evidence. I have spoken at several meetings and conferences here and abroad, engendering lively question-periods, along with the sale of considerable numbers of copies of the Report. Still no evidence of deception.

The critics argue that, had the evidence been yet more impressive, and devoid of the mere possibility of deception, they would have been won over. But history lends no support to any such plea. The literature of mediumistic communications in general, and the accounts of investigation of physical phenomena in particular, provide ample examples of cases where fraud is clearly ruled out, and only the notion of a carefully manipulated conspiracy among all concerned, chiefly the investigators or witnesses themselves, can be advanced to explain it all away.

The commonest argument in support of the critics is that scientific advances proceed by replication: do it in a different lab by different experimenters, and you overcome initial doubts. Do it again in a third or umpteenth lab, and you have won over the doughtiest of critics. Many psychical researchers, and not a few spiritualists, subscribe to this approach. Even Mrs. Emily Bradshaw, our wise, lively and charismatic spirit informer during the Scole sittings, said that replication is what we want.

But it isn't, because it isn't possible. The parrot-cry for replication is based on a totally false understanding of the nature of psychic experiences. Replication implies complete control over all the parameters of an experiment. The experimenter must know just what temperature, humidity, size, number, pressure, weight etc., will be required. Any change in one of these variables can wreck the experiment and falsify the results. This is orthodox science. It works admirably for the purpose for which it is designed. But it is entirely inappropriate to the psychic world. Here we have little or no control over the parameters. We cannot even be sure of what they are, let alone how they function. An attempt at replication is immediately sabotaged by the experimenter effect: the fact that the personality, attitude, vibrations of the himself is known to have an effect on the outcome. Strange to say this was demonstrated nearly half a century ago in a classic experiment conducted with G.W. Fisk by one of the Scole Report's critics, Professor [Donald West](#). We can rarely say, let alone determine, when a spirit originated voice or phenomenon will occur, or what form it will take.

This is no idle, academic debate. If you take the remarkable experiments conducted last year (and still continuing) by Professor [Gary Schwartz](#) and his colleagues in the University of Arizona with five gifted mediums, you will see that he has produced statistically overwhelming evidence of their ability, under conditions which rule out cold reading, sensory impressions, prior knowledge and the like, to identify a number of deceased relatives of a screened and unknown sitter. The published account of this (by the Society for Psychical Research) was attended by allegations that his control system might allow for error. His later experiments sought to dispose of any such reservations. We are now invited to replicate the results he achieved. That's impossible, because even were we able to get hold of the same mediums, they would have to be working with a different subject, operating in a different environment, with different experimenters emanating different vibrations.

It should be boldly stated that replication is a device appropriate within the framework of the three dimensional world which fits our everyday experience and requirements. The intrusion of the spirit world into our comfy physical domain immediately imports a different set of uncertainties. The Scole experience is inherently incapable of replication. We shall never be able to recapture the same persons, spirit communicators or physical environment which characterised those historic sittings.

What we might be able to do is to show that comparable physical phenomena can be produced by others, elsewhere, but under just as tight or even tighter control conditions. Strange to say, we have some of the evidence. My hope is that it will be published during 2002. In most respects it is nowhere near as varied or intelligent as the oral and physical transmissions the investigators experienced at Scole; but in one or two respects, the conditions in which phenomena were produced were even more impressive than prevailed with the Scole Group. This was in the production of pictures in the dark from lens-sealed Polaroid cameras.

What will happen when such evidence is published? You would think (if you were sufficiently naive) that the sceptics would immediately recognise their defeat and rush to embrace the new truth, dedicated as they are to accepting the supremacy of evidence over theory. My prediction is that they will respond with their most effective weapon: total silence.

Do not be dismayed or surprised by this pessimistic forecast! It is important to understand just why the sceptics retreat into their materialistic shells when faced with evidence which blows a gaping hole in their intellectual midribs. Just as the body automatically musters its defensive mechanisms to repel the intrusion of a foreign body, so the mind reacts similarly. Initially it will look for flaws in the evidence; but if none is found, then the result can take one or two forms. One is known as cognitive dissonance, the delightfully apt description of the mind which initially acknowledges the truth of some miraculous event demonstrated before its eyes, but which a day or day later rejects the experience as incompatible with the unalterable truth of practical experience. The other is silence.

Occasionally one can attempt to prise the sceptics from their shell by issuing challenges. I did this for one of the best-known and most talented sceptics in the business: Dr Susan Blackmore. She had been present when I spoke about the Scole report, and its aftermath, at the annual SPR conference in Northampton in 2000. Indeed, I chaired her own lecture shortly afterwards. Not long after, in announcing her departure from the scene after thirty years' vain attempt to discover some evidence of the existence of a psychic sense, she wrote an article in *NewScientist* in which she referred in passing to the 'infamous' *Scole Report*. That was the only time she had ever mentioned the report, to my knowledge edge. I then invited her to comment on a celebrated case which appeared to me to be very strong evidence, not merely or the paranormal origin of communications through two mediums early in the last century, but of the survival of the deceased communicator. She declined, ostensibly on the grounds that she had now left the field. When I suggested that her scepticism had done great damage to the subject, and that she owed it to her conscious, as well as to those who had accepted her authority, to give some explanation of the case, she continued to decline. I might add that the same challenge has been thrust under the noses of a wider sceptical audience, thus far to no avail.

It is unwise to under-estimate, or be contemptuous about, the strength of belief systems which cling like limpets to our consciousness, or to imagine that a constant inundation of evidence of the paranormal will shift their attitudes. Only when scientists as a body find themselves forced to confront and explain evidence so overpoweringly impressive that to ignore it is a clear sign of intellectual cowardice, will progress be made.

But we're working on it. And when we get there, the historic contribution of the Scole Group to broadening the understanding of man about his spiritual as well as his physical environment will be recognised.

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