

A Clearly Presented Account of Iceland's Most Famous Medium

A Review of
Indridi Indridason: The Icelandic Physical Medium,
by Erlendur Haraldsson and Loftur R. Gissurarson.

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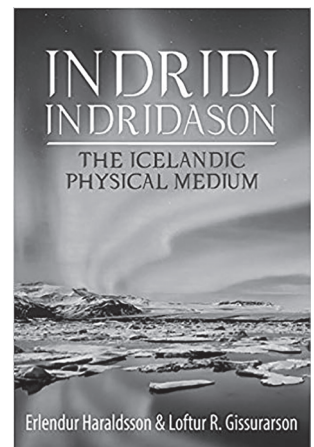
by Tom Ruffles¹

The achievements of Icelandic medium Indridi Indridason (1883-1912) deserve to be better known than they are. His mediumship was extensively studied during his lifetime, but most of the records are in Icelandic and have consequently been neglected by psychical researchers. In this landmark biography Erlendur Haraldsson and Loftur R. Gissurarson bring him to the attention of a wider audience. They produced a study of Indridi, published as an issue of the Society for Psychical Research's *Proceedings* (Haraldsson & Gissurarson, 1989), but since then further records of his séances have come to light, and their treatment of him here has been much expanded.

The authors have had access to a wide range of information: a number of first-hand accounts of sittings, and two minute books compiled by the Experimental Society in Reykjavik, a body dedicated to documenting Indridi's mediumship. These books detail a number of his séances and had been considered lost, but they were rediscovered in about the year 2000. These sources, extracts from many of which Erlendur and Loftur have translated from the Icelandic, supply detailed accounts of Indridi's séances. Although other minute books are still missing, the surviving papers are a valuable source for understanding the scope of his mediumship.

Indridi, a farmer's son, came to Reykjavik around the end of 1904 as a printer's apprentice. Einar Hjorleifson Kvaran (1859-1938), a writer, had read F. W. H. Myers' *Human Personality and its Survival of Bodily Death* (Myers, 1903) the year after its publication, and started a circle to examine mediumship. In early 1905 Indridi became its medium, his abilities having manifested during sessions at the home of a relative of his, and the circle was formalized as the Experimental Society, marking the foundation of psychical research in Iceland. As a member of this group Indridi achieved a high profile in Iceland and was intensively investigated.

Unfortunately Indridi's mediumistic career was short, spanning a period of less than five years, from



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1905 to 1909. During that time the Experimental Society made observations and carefully recorded the phenomena. Its members were affluent enough to be able to erect dedicated premises and pay Indridi a salary. There were often large numbers of sitters at the séances, at times as many as a hundred. They were separated from Indridi and “watchmen,” who sat close to him and were responsible for ensuring he did not cheat, by a mesh screen that was firmly fixed to walls, ceiling and floor and accessed by a slit.

Indridi produced a wide range of phenomena, analyzed in detail by Erlendur and Loftur, including raps, lights, breezes, movement of objects – sometimes violently – smells, playing of musical instruments, and automatic and direct writing. Even more dramatically, there were materializations of figures and body parts, even a figure described as somewhere between a calf and a horse which occurred outside the séance room but in Indridi's presence; the dematerialization of Indridi's arm; levitation of the medium; sitters' sensations of being touched and even kissed; and voices, including male and female voices singing a duet.

There were also mental phenomena, including information provided by spirit communicators. Notable in this category was “Emil Jensen” accurately describing a fire in Copenhagen in 1905 Indridi could not have had knowledge of by normal means, which the authors analyze in detail and compare to Emanuel Swedenborg's vision of the 1759 conflagration in Stockholm (Haraldsson, 2011). Intriguingly, an Emil Jensen had existed, and lived a couple of houses away from the site of the Copenhagen fire. He died in 1898. By any standard, Indridi's was an impressive repertoire. During the winter of 1907-8 he was even the focus of what appeared to be a poltergeist outbreak.

If Indridi's mediumship was fraudulent, it was a sophisticated performance, yet he was not well educated and sources of information that might have been available to assist him in deception were limited. Unfortunately, although some phenomena occurred outside the séance room, most sittings took place in darkness, which weakens their value, despite the medium having been subjected to thorough searches and the introduction of luminous tape in late 1908. This initiative was carried out by Gudmundur Hannesson (1866-1946), a scientist who investigated Indridi during the winter of 1908-9, ensuring that conditions were as rigorous as possible (Hannesson, 1924). His verdict was positive, even though he could not explain what he had witnessed. Sadly, Indridi's mediumship was cut short by a severe attack of typhoid fever in 1909, after which he gave no further sittings, and he died in 1912, aged 28, from tuberculosis.

After an analysis of Indridi's own phenomena there is a comparison with those of D. D. Home, Rudi Schneider, and Einer Nielsen which helps to contextualize Indridi, and indicates just how significant his mediumship was. Further detail is provided in appendices: a chronological breakdown of the phenomena, with comments by the authors; a summary of the precautions taken by Gudmundur which shows just how painstaking they were; further comparisons with the mediumship of D. D. Home; and an annotated list of the large cast of séance participants, communicators and other significant individuals who figured in Indridi's mediumship, compiled by Walter Meyer zu Erpen and Haraldsson.

In their clearly laid out account, the authors ably track the progress of Indridi's mediumship without unduly pushing a particular view, though they are sympathetic to the claim that it was genuine. Although they note that records were not always comprehensive and often leave questions unanswered,

in their summing up they discuss aspects that lend support to the genuineness of Indridi's mediumship, such as the communication of facts unknown to him that were later verified, correspondences between characteristics of communicators and the individuals they purported to be when alive (individuals Indridi had never met), and skills that Indridi did not possess, such as xenoglossy and the ability to sing the male and female parts of a duet. They conclude that there is "strong evidence for paranormal physical phenomena... [pointing towards] human survival of bodily death" (p. 228).

This is a case that tests one's boggle threshold, yet the alternatives are collusion or credulity of enormous proportions by the participants in Indridi's séances. From the available evidence, those who sat with Indridi were intelligent and aware of the need for strict supervision, taking appropriate action to guard against fraud, and not gullible. A chapter on contemporary criticism of Indridi shows that much of it was based on prejudice rather than being a balanced assessment.

Unless the missing minute books surface, shedding further light on Indridi, this is the most authoritative overview of his mediumship we are likely to have. The authors have supplied a valuable contribution both to our understanding of this outstanding medium in particular, and to the literature of physical mediumship generally. As Carlos Alvarado suggests in his introduction, in its clarity it stands as a model for rescuing other past mediums from obscurity.

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