

## Eleanor M. Sidgwick (1845-1936)<sup>1</sup>

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**Abstract:** Eleanor M. Sidgwick was an important figure in the early history of the Society for Psychical Research (SPR). In later years she became known for her critiques of the evidence for physical mediumship, and for her systematic studies of apparitions of the dead and hauntings, premonitions, clairvoyance, and the mediumship of Leonora E. Piper. Sidgwick also made significant contributions to the study of spontaneous and experimental telepathy, the cross-correspondences, and book tests, or attempts to get spirit communicators to obtain veridical information from the content of a book.

*Keywords:* history of parapsychology, Sidgwick, mediumship, telepathy

Mrs. Eleanor Mildred Sidgwick was one of the most productive psychical researchers of the early Society for Psychical Research (SPR). Born Eleanor Mildred Balfour in 1845, at East Lothian, Scotland, she was part of the influential Balfour family. In addition to the psychical research work, which is the topic of this note, Sidgwick participated in some of the physical experiments of her brother-in-law, John William Strutt, 3<sup>rd</sup> Baron Rayleigh (e.g., Rayleigh & Sidgwick, 1883), and was very active in the university education of women. She was Treasurer, Vice-Principal, and Principal at Newnham College. Sidgwick married Henry Sidgwick in 1876, and shared with him deep interests in women's education and in psychical research (for biographical information see Johnson, 1936; E. Sidgwick, 1938).

Sidgwick was involved in psychical investigations before the SPR was founded. Together with some close associates, among them Edmund Gurney, Walter Leaf, Frederic W. H. Myers, and Henry Sidgwick, she had séances with several physical mediums during the 1870s (Sidgwick, 1886b). They included Annie Fairlamb, Anna Eva Fay, Kate Fox (then Mrs. Jencken), Mary Rosina Showers, and Catherine Wood. But the results of the séances were not in favor of the genuineness of the phenomena and led the group to a general feeling of skepticism. Sidgwick commented at the end of the article:



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I feel bound ... to admit that by far the larger part of the testimony put forward as affording solid ground for a belief in them, which I have been able to examine, is of such a nature as to justify the contempt with which scientific men generally regard it; and though it is to be regretted, it is hardly under the circumstances to be wondered at, that this contempt is hastily extended to the whole of the testimony. If what I have written should contribute, in however small a degree, to the improvement of the evidence on this subject in the future, I shall feel that it has not been written in vain. (Sidgwick, 1886b, p. 74)

In her article about Spiritualism for the ninth edition of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* Sidgwick returned to the issue of physical mediumship and stated that most witnesses “do not seem to have duly appreciated the possibilities of conjuring, nor to have taken sufficient precautions to exclude it” (Sidgwick, 1887, p. 406). She continued to present such views in evaluations of the phenomena of spirit photography and the performances of William Eglinton (Sidgwick, 1886a, 1891b), the cause of several internal SPR controversies (Gauld, 1968).

In later years Sidgwick continued her critiques of physical mediumship, representing the skepticism of many about physical phenomena, and upholding accurate reporting of the conditions of research. Two examples are her reviews of the investigations of Enrico Morselli with Eusapia Palladino (Sidgwick, 1909) and of W. J. Crawford with the Goligher Circle (Sidgwick, 1917). Some of her book reviews also represented a conservative and sometimes necessary reminder of ambiguities in popular publications (Sidgwick, 1918).

Many of Sidgwick’s main contributions showed what Alan Gauld (2018) has referred to as her “gift for subduing and organizing large quantities of refractory material.” An initial one was her evaluation of about 370 cases the SPR had collected about apparitions of the dead, some of which were haunting cases (Sidgwick, 1885). This included: 1) an examination of conventional explanations; 2) an evaluation of patterns in the cases or lack of them; and 3) a consideration of ideas to explain genuine apparitions. The amount of detail and critical analysis presented by Sidgwick had no precedent in the previous literature examining apparitions of the dead, a situation similar to her later analyses of cases of premonitions (Sidgwick, 1888) and clairvoyance (Sidgwick, 1891a).

She also showed great care in her analyses of published cases of “phantasms of the living” (Sidgwick, 1923), and of the psychological aspects of Mrs. Leonora E. Piper’s mediumship (Sidgwick, 1915). Some of the chapters of this study were about spirit controls and their relation to the medium; language, memories, and association of ideas by the spirit controls; aspects of various spirit communicators (such as difficulties in communicating and symbolic statements), and relations between Piper’s different states of consciousness. She concluded about the medium’s trance that it was “probably a state of self-induced hypnosis in which her hypnotic self personates different characters either consciously and deliberately, or unconsciously” (Sidgwick, 1915, p. 330), but with telepathically acquired information. Sidgwick discussed mental mediumship in several other papers, including papers about cross-correspondences, book tests, and specific séances (see, respectively, Sidgwick, 1910, 1921, and Sidgwick & Piddington, 1909).

Furthermore, Sidgwick studied telepathy. She conducted experiments (Sidgwick & Johnson, 1892; Sidgwick, Professor [H.], Sidgwick, Mrs. H., & Smith, G. A. (1889), some of which she presented at the

1892 International Congress of Experimental Psychology held in London (Sidgwick, 1892). In an overview of the topic, published in the *Dictionary of Philosophy and Psychology*, Sidgwick concluded that “there is a body of evidence of various kinds for the existence of telepathy which cannot be ignored; but, as yet, little has been done towards discovering the nature of the process or the conditions under which it occurs” (Sidgwick, 1902, p. 672).

Sidgwick herself contributed to knowledge about the process in an analyses of its “hindrances and complications” as shown in percipient’s impressions (Sidgwick, 1924). She wrote:

I have now, I think, sufficiently shown that there are obstacles or at any rate difficulties in the way of telepathic transmission which easily may, and in fact often do, interfere with the process, and prevent a “message” being received as the sender intended. Apart from difficulties on the agent’s own side, and even when a message has apparently safely reached some part of the percipient’s mind, it may fail to pass successfully from that to the normal waking consciousness. And this not only because the impression is sometimes too feeble to prevail, but because as transmitted to the normal consciousness the latter may fail to interpret it. And the difficulties may be aggravated by differences in the results, according as different modes of externalisation—different methods of transferring the subliminal impression to the normal consciousness—are used, and even by deliberate invention in the subliminal mind. (Sidgwick, 1924, p. 68)

In a lecture about the history of the SPR (Sidgwick, 1932), Sidgwick stated that she thought there was “occasional communication of an evidential kind between the living and the dead” (p. 26). The paper was read in absentia by her brother Lord Balfour, who said to the audience at the end of his presentation that Sidgwick had authorized him to state to the audience that she believed in survival and in spirit communication.

Alice Johnson (1936) commented on the great amount of work that Sidgwick had done for the SPR behind the scenes. This included very time consuming editorial work related to the Society’ Journal and Proceedings, as well as working with the committee behind the Census of Hallucinations (Sidgwick, Johnson, Myers, Podmore, & Sidgwick, 1894). According to Johnson the massive report of this work “was written chiefly by Mrs. Sidgwick, who also worked out the statistical calculations” (Johnson, 1936, p. 67).

I suspect there are different evaluations of the value of Sidgwick’s work. Believers in the physical phenomena she criticized felt she had a hypercritical stance. An example was the article the medium William Eglinton wrote about Sidgwick, to which was appended a great number of letters from other individuals defending the medium or reporting having witnessed events that could not be accounted for by fraud (Eglinton, 1886). Others, such as Edith Lyttelton, praised her “eagle eye for any possible inaccuracy or faulty corroboration” (Lyttelton, 1936, p. 21). There is no question that Sidgwick had an immense capacity for analyzing large quantities of data to find weaknesses and patterns in reports of psychic phenomena, and that her behind the scenes organizational work was very important for the development of the SPR.

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### **Eleanor M. Sidgwick (1845-1936)**

Eleanor M. Sidgwick était une figure importante de l'histoire de la Société de recherche psychique (SPR). Au cours des dernières années, elle a été reconnue pour ses critiques des preuves de la médiumnité physique, pour son étude systématique des apparitions des défunts et des hantises, des prémonitions, de la clairvoyance et de la médiumnité de Leonora E. Piper. Sidgwick a également fait des contributions importantes à l'étude de la télépathie spontanée et expérimentale, aux correspondances croisées et aux tests de livre (ces essais pour obtenir des informations véridiques de la part d'un esprit à partir du contenu d'un livre).

### **Eleanor M. Sidgwick (1845-1936)**

Eleanor M. Sidgwick war eine wichtige Figur in der frühen Geschichte der Society for Psychical Research (SPR). In späteren Jahren wurde sie bekannt als Kritikerin des Beweismaterials in Bezug auf den physikalischen Mediumismus sowie für ihre systematischen Untersuchungen der Erscheinungen Verstorbener und Spukerscheinungen, von Vorahnungen, des Hellsehens und der Medialität von Leonora E. Piper. Von Sidgwick stammen auch wichtige Beiträge zur Untersuchung spontaner und experimenteller Telepathie, zu Kreuz-Korrespondenzen und Büchertests oder zu Versuchen, mit Hilfe jenseitiger Kommunikatoren zutreffende Informationen über den Inhalt eines Buches zu erhalten.

### **Eleanor M. Sidgwick (1845-1936)**

Eleanor M. Sidgwick fue una figura importante en la historia temprana de la Society for Psychical Research (SPR). En los últimos años se hizo conocida por sus críticas de la evidencia de la mediumnidad física, y por sus estudios sistemáticos de apariciones de muertos y "casas encantadas," premoniciones, clarividencia, y la mediumnidad de Leonora E. Piper. Sidgwick también contribuyó significativamente al estudio de la telepatía espontánea y experimental, las correspondencias cruzadas, y la prueba de libros, que se refería a que los comunicadores espirituales pudieran obtener información verídica del contenido de un libro.