

# Was Crookes a crook?

William Brock

**The Sorcerer of Kings: The Case of Daniel Dunglas Home and William Crookes.** By Gordon Stein. *Prometheus*: 1993. Pp. 140. \$22.95.

In 1861 William Crookes discovered thallium spectroscopically. For 10 years he patiently developed techniques to determine its atomic weight accurately. All weighings were conducted in a partial vacuum. While operating with his balance in an evacuated container, Crookes noted that the equilibrium of the balance was disturbed by slight differences in temperature between his thallium samples. Warmer bodies appeared lighter than colder ones. Because, in a vacuum, this could not be attributed to condensation or air movement, Crookes concluded that he had stumbled on a 'signpost' linking heat with gravitation.

In the same decade, spiritualism had swept across Europe from the United States and spread through all levels of Victorian society. Although Crookes came from a large family and many of his siblings had died in childhood, the death of his brother Philip at sea in 1867 affected him so deeply that Crookes began to seek assurance of Philip's immortality in the seance room. It was here that he met the Scottish-American medium, Daniel

Dunglas Home (1833–86), the model for Browning's Mr Sludge.

Although Home seems never to have indulged in physical mediumship, his amazing powers included levitation, elongation of the body, the ability to play an accordion without his fingers touching the keys and the depression of spring balances. Crookes and Home became firm friends, and when Crookes investigated Home between 1869 and 1870, he obviously connected Home's ability to exert a 'psychic force' (as Crookes termed it) with anti-gravitation and the effects of warmth in reducing the weights of bodies in his evacuation experiments with thallium. With Home as his experimental tool, might not Crookes be able to give a rational explanation of the psychic powers of mediums and cap this with an explanation of gravity?

The result was the radiometer. Initially developed to test mediums' mysterious powers, the instrument soon led Crookes to the electric light bulb, the world of cathode rays and dark spaces, the separation of rare-earth elements and to wonderful speculations about the evolution of the elements.

The creative connection between the investigation of mediumship and the origins of nuclear physics is not, however, the purpose of Gordon Stein's book which is, rather, a critical reexamination of Crookes's psychic investigations between 1869 and 1875. He concentrates his fullest attention on the reliability of Crookes's tests of Home, reopening in the process the case against Crookes's honesty first made by Trevor H. Hall in *The Spiritualists* (Duckworth, 1962) and by Eric J. Dingwall in *The Critics' Dilemma* (1966). Hall's inference that Crookes had a sexual affair in 1872 with the pretty, young physical medium, Florence Cook, was undermined by the brilliant detective work of R. G. Medhurst and K. M. Goldney in the *Proceedings of the Society for Psychical Research* in 1964. Nevertheless, Stein believes that Crookes was either too ashamed ever to admit that he had been duped by her or, alternatively, that he must have fraudulently conspired with Florence either for sexual favours or to support the claims of spiritualism.

More seriously, he argues that Crookes conspired to help Mrs Fay in 1875 when a galvanometer test 'proved' that she remained under restraint during her physical mediumship. Because both Cook and Fay were demonstrably tricksters, Stein is led to reexamine Crookes's investigation of Home. The latter's strange abilities are explained as known conjuring tricks as well as by Home's careful control of the conditions Crookes thought he was imposing on Home. Contrary to received opinion, Stein also shows that Home was exposed as a fraud on several occasions, besides being a skilled confidence tricks-

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Sir William Crookes portrayed by Spy in *Vanity Fair*, 1903.

ter. In that case, Crookes appears either gullible (the pseudo-Crookes, as W. B. Carpenter labelled him in *Nature*) or guilty of duplicity.

Although I do not doubt that Crookes's belief in spiritualism, or theosophy, affected his scientific judgment of mediums, Stein's conclusion (supported in a preface from the redoubtable James Randi) that Crookes was crooked is not fully supported by the surviving (admittedly fragmentary) evidence, much of which is cited in the book. Because Stein uses Dingwall's silly description of Home as 'sorcerer of kings', a more plausible explanation lies, perhaps, in the identity of a sorcerer's apprentice. The apprentice, however, was not Home's but Crookes's. An assistant who was ingenious enough to blow glass into beautiful radiometers and Crookes tubes and who was young enough to play poltergeist with his master and his guests might easily have been persuaded to 'assist' in the wonderful delusions Home, Cook and Fay constructed. It may be significant, therefore, that Crookes's most brilliant assistant left his employ in 1880, by which time Cook and Fay, if not Home, had been exposed as fakes, and Crookes had assumed his ortho-personality. Stein makes his case against Crookes and Home clearly and logically; but it is by no means the last word on one of the oddest affairs in the history of science. □

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Home's "amazing powers" included levitation and elongation of the body.