
William Fletcher Barrett, Spiritualism, and Psychical Research in Edwardian Dublin

Shane McCorristine

Government of Ireland CARA Postdoctoral Mobility Fellow, NUI Maynooth

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Abstract. Although primarily known today as a physicist and founder member of the Society for Psychical Research (SPR), William Fletcher Barrett (1844-1925) was an important figure in social and scientific circles in late Victorian and Edwardian Ireland. From the 1870s onwards, when he became Professor of Experimental Physics at the Royal College of Science for Ireland, Barrett created an interest in psychical research among prominent members of the social and cultural elite in Dublin. This article reconstructs the history and membership of the little-known Dublin Section of the SPR (1908-c.1914), in which Barrett was the leading personality, and sketches out some conclusions which can be drawn from the make-up of this forgotten group.

Key Words. William Fletcher Barrett, psychical research, W.B. Yeats, spiritualism, Dublin society.

Resumen. Si bien en la actualidad se le conoce como físico y fundador de la Sociedad para la Investigación Psíquica (SPR), William Fletcher Barrett (1844-1925) fue una figura importante en los círculos sociales y científicos de la Irlanda de finales de la época victoriana y de la eduardiana. A partir de la década de 1870, cuando fue nombrado catedrático de Física Experimental del Royal College of Science for Ireland, Barrett promovió interés en la investigación psíquica entre prominentes miembros de la élite social y cultural de Dublín. El artículo reconstruye la historia y la afiliación de la poco conocida sección dublina de la SPR (1908-aprox.1914), de la cual Barrett fue la personalidad más destacada, y esboza algunas conclusiones que pueden extraerse de la composición de ese grupo olvidado.

Palabras clave. William Fletcher Barrett, investigación psíquica, W.B. Yeats, espiritualismo, sociedad dublina.

W.F. Barrett and Psychical Research in Ireland

While the clash between science, spiritualism, and psychical research in Victorian England may be a familiar one to historians, the fact that William Fletcher Barrett was a central figure in the scientific world of nineteenth- and early-twentieth century Ireland has, until

quite recently, been largely ignored. There is no biography of Barrett (although see Mollan 2007; Gauld 2004; Inglis 1988-89) and despite living, working, and researching in Ireland from 1873 to 1916, he is primarily known today only in connection with the Society for Psychical Research, a predominantly Cambridge and London-based group which he

helped to found. This does an enormous disservice to Barrett's professional and personal integration in Irish society as – *ipsis Hiberniis Hiberniores* – a scientist, educationalist, populariser of physics, psychical researcher, and lobbyist for various domestic reform movements.

The son of a Congregationalist minister, Barrett attended Old Trafford Grammar School before studying chemistry and physics at the Royal College of Chemistry, London. From 1863 until 1867 he worked at the Royal Institution, London, where he was an assistant to the Irish-born John Tyndall and came under the guidance of the great Thomas Huxley and Michael Faraday (Noakes 2004). In a research context where subjects such as a “fourth state of matter” (Crookes 1879) and a “fourth dimension” (Zöllner 1880) were being investigated by physicists, it is no surprise that prominent scientists engaged in significant amounts of ‘boundary work’, seeking to exclude what was considered illegitimate and deviant from scientific investigation. Indeed, each of Barrett's mentors at the Royal Institution had developed entrenched anti-spiritualist attitudes in reaction to the spread of table-turning and spiritualism in mid-Victorian Britain. However, it was the visit of an Irishman named John Wilson to the laboratory of the Royal Institution that inspired Barrett's interest in such matters and connected him with a new intellectual network in Ireland which discounted the scientific naturalist boundaries between science and psychical research.

After a disagreement with Tyndall, Barrett left the Royal Institution in 1866 to teach science at the International College, London, and then went on to lecture on physics at the Royal School of Naval Architecture (1869-73) at South Kensington. By this stage Barrett had commenced his important research into the phenomenon of sensitive flames, and in 1868 he came to Dublin to lecture at the Royal Dublin Society to a “crowded” and “highly fashionable” assemblage which included Sir Robert and Lady Kane. According to an enthusiastic report in the *Irish Times*, Barrett told his audience of the unity of a universe that was “ringing with noiseless music”, and conducted many experiments and demonstrations of this effect. He then went on to talk about:

complex bodies which are capable of being thrown into an abnormal state, and when in that condition were sensitive to the slightest stimuli if of the proper kind. This he believed to be the foundation for whatever truth there might be in the science of homeopathy and the still more startling facts of mesmerism (“Royal Dublin Society”).

For a couple of years in the early 1870s Barrett spent his vacations with John Wilson, who owned an estate at Daramona, Streete, Co. Westmeath. Wilson was an enthusiast for advanced astronomical physics and with his young son William Edward Wilson (later a Fellow of the Royal Society), had commissioned a reflector telescope from the famous Grubb's Works in Rathmines, a suburb of Dublin. At this stage the whole area of animal magnetism and mesmerism still had an aura of pseudo-science about it, despite the widespread use of mesmerism as a therapeutic and palliative tool among mid-Victorian physicians and surgeons (Winter 1998). Ireland was no exception: a Dublin Mesmeric Association existed briefly in the 1850s and a Trinity College Dublin mathematician named Hill H. Hardy gained some notoriety as a local practitioner (“Mesmerism”). Wilson and his son persuaded Barrett to scientifically examine certain aspects of the phenomena.

On one visit Wilson rounded up some young “uneducated” village girls to be placed into a trance state – again an unexceptional practice in an era when Irish working class patients were considered to be physiologically close to animals (Winter 1998: 61-2). Barrett soon found that these ‘sensitives’ could act as conduits of thought-transference:

In the mesmeric trance – in spite of every precaution that I took to prevent deception – whatever sensations I felt, whether of touch, taste or smell, were transferred to the subject, and, moreover, ideas and words which I thought of were reproduced more or less accurately by the hypnotised subject (Barrett 1924: 282).

Barrett believed this to be a finding of immense importance, perhaps the discovery of an unknown mental faculty. This was the beginning of Barrett's conviction that thought-transference (or telepathy, as it later came to be known) could be the factor in our lives which would dominate all our conduct. “What would be the use of a luxurious mansion at the West End and Parisian cooks if all the time the misery and starvation of our fellow creatures at

the East End were telepathically part and parcel of our daily lives?” (Barrett 1917: 294-5).

By this time Barrett had established a name for himself among elite scientists and in 1873 he gained the support of the English astronomer William Huggins in his application for a position in the London Institution (W. Huggins to W.F. Barrett, April 27th, 1873, William Fletcher Barrett Papers). Another scientist Barrett befriended was the Irish polymath Robert Stawell Ball, the Professor of Applied Mathematics and Mechanics at the recently established Royal College of Science for Ireland, of which Sir Robert Kane was Dean (McCorristine 2010). Ball came into contact with Barrett when the latter gave his lecture on sensitive flames to the Royal Dublin Society: Ball wrote that Barrett “had astonished the scientific world by his beautiful discovery of flames which would respond to sound” (Ball 1915: 86). In October 1873 Ball urged Barrett to go for the vacant Chair of Physics in the RCScI saying “the opportunities for original work seem to be very great” (Ball to Barrett, October 9th 1873). Through the influence of Ball, and perhaps background support from Tyndall, Barrett was appointed Professor of Experimental Physics in succession to William Barker, who had died that year.

By 1874, when he was living and teaching physics in Dublin, Barrett began attending séances held in a Kingstown residence owned by James Wilson, John’s brother. Here Barrett investigated the physical phenomena of a medium named Florrie Clark, the ten year old daughter of an English solicitor, and also engaged in experiments with the Lauders family who, under the name Lafayette, were spiritualists and the leading photographers in late-Victorian Dublin (Barrett 1917). Barrett’s connection with the Wilson family continued into the 1880s when he tutored James Wilson’s son, Henry Wilson (later Chief of the Imperial General Staff during World War I; assassinated by two Irish Republican Army volunteers in 1922) (Barrett 1924: 284).

Barrett was therefore already an immensely well-connected figure in Irish science and psychical research before he became the driving force behind the foundation of the Society for Psychical Research in London in 1882 and the American Society for Psychical Research in Boston in 1885. Colleagues,

friends, and correspondents included William James, Frederic W.H. Myers, Oliver Lodge, Charles Richet, Gerald Balfour, and Balfour Stewart. One of his greatest friends and colleagues was Alfred Russel Wallace, who stayed with Barrett in Kingstown on occasion (Marchant 1916: 10). Barrett was a well-known figure in late-Victorian Dublin, a moderate Home Ruler, philanthropist, an advocate for women’s education in science and medicine, and a supporter of reforms in technical education. Eleanor M. Sidgwick summed up his life:

There can be no doubt that Sir William Barrett had in a remarkable degree a power of stirring up in others interest in subjects which interested himself. Both in conversation and as a lecturer he was very successful in this, not only in psychical research, but also, I believe, in experimental physics, the subject with which he was professionally engaged during the greater part of his life (Sidgwick 1925: 415).

Barrett’s activities in the early years of the SPR have been well-documented: yet his activities in science and psychical research in Dublin deserve to be reconstructed. Barrett organised extensive experiments in sound and vibration in the late 1870s: one colleague later claimed that he was one of the first to use the microphone after an experiment in Kingstown (“Late Sir William Barrett”). Aside from his central role in the thought-transference tests in Dublin and London, Barrett also engaged in experiments in the ‘Reichenbach phenomena’ in Dublin and extensively investigated dowsing and poltergeists during his vacations from the RCScI. As he approached retirement in 1909, Barrett greatly increased his activity in promoting psychical research in Ireland. He published *On the Threshold of a New World of Thought* in 1908, while in 1909 he gave public lectures at St. Peter’s School-house, Camden Row (“Recent Results of Psychical Research”) and at a fundraiser for the Bray Art Furniture Industry Improvement Fund (“Telepathy and Recent Developments”). Yet it was the founding of a native, Dublin section of the SPR which is perhaps most worthy of attention in the context of Barrett’s Irish career in psychical research.

The Dublin Section of the SPR

In May 1908 a Dublin section of the SPR was founded with the Reverend Dr. James William

Barlow, late Vice-Provost of Trinity College, Dublin, as Chairman, Barrett as Vice-Chairman, and his friend, the physicist E.E. Fournier d'Albe, as Honorary Secretary. It was described by one member as "a research group of intelligent, informed and highly placed men and women" (Cousins and Cousins 1950: 115). The original membership of 47 in 1908 rose to 75 in 1909 ("Report of the Council for the Year 1908": 40). At the end of 1910 it was reported that "considerable progress" had been made with 10 meetings held and the membership rising to 110 members ("Dublin Section...1910": 64). At the end of 1911 the DSSPR reported "another year of fairly successful work" and a membership of 105 ("Dublin Section...1911") which compares favourably with a membership rate of around 1000 for the SPR at the turn of the century. Most meetings took place at rooms on 33 Molesworth Street. A library was set up and 13 papers and addresses were delivered in 1911, three of which were given by Barrett (ibid). By 1912, there were 110 members and 16 meetings were held ("Dublin Local Section"). In 1913 J.H. Hyslop gave a lecture on "Psychical Research in America" to the DSSPR, chaired by Barrett ("Psychical Research").

From the start the DSSPR was dominated by investigations into the planchette, ouija board, automatic writing, and séance phenomena. These were all in contrast to Barrett's earlier interests in psychical research (telepathy, Reichenbach phenomena) and one member sought to rectify the impression that the activities of the DSSPR could be identified with spiritualism ("Society for Psychical Research. Dublin Section": 64). Another feature of the DSSPR was the fact that it patronised autonomous units to engage in private experimental work, although the results were not "of a very definite character" ("Dublin Section...1910: 64). The extent to which Barrett dominated the running of the DSSPR can be ascertained by a comment in the *Journal of the Society for Psychical Research*: "The Society is most fortunate in having the constant guidance and sympathetic assistance of its chairman, Professor Barrett. His whole-hearted interest in its researches and his constant efforts on its behalf give courage and hope to the Committee to continue experimental work" (ibid). A colleague of his also later reminisced: "Barrett might be

described as Ireland's representative in the international movement to extend the frontiers of knowledge beyond the limits of the material order of life" ("Late Sir William Barrett"). The last mention of the DSSPR I have come across in the *JSPR* was with Barrett's obituary of Barlow in January 1914 and it is clear that Barrett began to spend less time in Ireland following his marriage to Florence Elizabeth Willey in 1916. Yet judging by material contained in the Barrett Papers in the Society for Psychical Research Archive, University Library, Cambridge, his wife shared his deep interest in spiritualism, attending séances with the famous London medium "Mrs Leonard" (Gladys Osborne Leonard) over the next few years. At one such occasion in August 1921 Barrett was asked: "Have you been thinking about Ireland lately? Feda [the spirit] gets the condition of Ireland close to you" (Barrett Papers, SPR. MS 3/A1/15/7).

In September 1908 a reception of behalf of Oliver Lodge was held at the Shelbourne Hotel at which it was stated that over 60 members and friends attended. The three main Irish newspapers covered the event and a shortlist of 33 VIP members was given in two of them ("Society for Psychical Research", *Irish Times*; "Society for Psychical Research", *Freeman's Journal*). Using this list, along with other press coverage and notices of the DSSPR in the *JSPR*, I have here pieced together some basic information on 48 members, reconstructed from the *Dictionary of Irish Biography* and other sources (names with an asterisk alongside them were found on the VIP list). This, of course, surveys less than half the total membership, and in some cases, aside from a name, no further biographical details could be found. Most of the names here have not previously been connected with psychical research in Dublin.

Reverend Dr. James William Barlow*
(1826-1913).

Chairman, later Vice-President. Senior Fellow of Trinity College, Dublin, was Vice-Provost by the time of his retirement in 1908. Author of *Eternal Punishment and Eternal Death: An Essay* (1865); *De Origine Mali: An Essay Concerning Modern Scientific Atheism* (1871); *The Ultimatum of Pessimism: An Ethical Study* (1882). In his obituary in the *JSPR*, probably written by Barrett, Barlow was described as "a distinguished member of our Society":

His earliest studies were chiefly mathematical, and Sir William Rowan Hamilton taught him his famous theory of quaternions; but he was widely read in both Ancient and Modern Literature, and deeply interested in various branches of Science. The range and depth of his knowledge were indeed prodigious, and it is no small tribute to the work of Psychical Research that so profound and acute a thinker should have become a warm adherent of our Society; nearly twenty years ago he became a member, and was elected the first Vice-President of the Dublin section of the S.P.R., a position he retained to the time of his death. In this he was warmly supported by his distinguished daughter, Miss Jane Barlow, D.Litt., whose literary eminence is so widely recognized. Mr. Myers's great work on *Human Personality* deeply impressed Mr. Barlow, and he brought it under the notice of Dr. J. P. Mahaffy, who included a considerable portion of this work in the Dublin University Fellowship Course—the earliest official recognition by a famous, and indeed conservative, University of Psychical Research as a branch of science. In this connection we may here record the interesting fact that Dr. J. P. Mahaffy, S.F. T.C.D., the present Vice-Provost of Trinity College, Dublin, has consented to take Mr. Barlow's place as Vice-President of the Dublin section of our Society (“Obituary. The Rev. J.W. Barlow, S.F. T.C.D.”).

Sir John Pentland Mahaffy (1839-1919).

Classical scholar who took holy orders with the Church of Ireland and who acted as tutor to Oscar Wilde in TCD from 1871-4. Founded the Irish Georgian Society in 1908, became Provost of TCD in 1914, was President of the RIA from 1911-6, and was knighted in 1918. Mahaffy was a conservative unionist who opposed the influence of the Gaelic League in TCD (Maume 2009). Barrett and Mahaffy were both leading members of the Proportional Representation Society of Ireland and gave lectures to the Birmingham and Midland Institute in 1881 (Ball 1915: 195).

Sir William F. Barrett* (1844-1925).

Vice-Chairman. Member of Royal Irish Academy, 1874, Fellow of the Royal Society, 1899.

Edmund Edward Fournier d'Albe* (1868-1933) and **Mrs Edith Fournier d'Albe*** (b.1870).

Honorary Secretary. Physicist born in London, BSc (1891), MSc (1912). Lectured in the RCSI and TCD and collaborated with Oliver

Lodge in Birmingham. Member of the Royal Irish Academy, 1908, Fournier d'Albe was also an Irish language enthusiast and Celtic scholar (Lunney 2009). One of the organisers of the Pan-Celtic Congress (with W.B. Yeats and others), investigated a haunted house on Baggot Street with Yeats in 1909 (Young 1945: 97) and was prominent in the investigations into the Goligher Circle in Belfast. Author of *The Life of Sir William Crookes O.M., F.R.S.* (1923) and *New Light on Immortality* (1908). Created a modified planchette “designed to test whether the writing produced was ever done otherwise than by normal automatic muscular action” (“Society for Psychical Research. Dublin Section”: 64) and an “optophone” designed to make light audible (Fournier d'Albe 1927). Wife was née Consuelo Hitchcock. The couple were not happy together and an assault case was reported in the press in 1924 (Lunney 2009).

Dr. J.J. Doherty LL.D.

Honorary Treasurer. Worked at the Training Office, Education Department, Marlborough Street. Gave a paper to DSSPR in 1910. Listed as a member of the SPR 1905-10 with addresses in Rathgar and later Rathmines.

Thomas William Rolleston* (1857-1920) and **Mrs Maud Rolleston***.

Committee member. Journalist and poet, educated at TCD, prominent figure in Irish Literary Revival. Member of the RIA, 1901 (Murphy 2009). Praised Barrett in “Some Recent Results of Psychical Research”, *Irish Church Quarterly*, (January, 1909). Married to Maud, née Stopford. Barrett taught her cousin, the historian Alice Stopford Green, at the RCSI.

Henrietta Margaret White, LL.D.* (1856-1936).

Committee member. Educated at Alexandra College and Newnham College, Cambridge. From 1890 until 1932 she served as Lady Principal of Alexandra College and advocated for women's training and education. She was the second female recipient of an honorary LL.D. from TCD in 1905 (Bryan 2009).

Lady Margaret Sarah Dockrell, née Shannon (1849-1926).

Suffragist, councillor, and philanthropist. Born

in Dublin, married to Sir Maurice Edward Dockrell. Educated at Alexandra College and TCD (Sheahan 2009).

Jane Barlow, LL.D. (1857-1917).

Committee member. Eldest daughter of James William Barlow, she was encouraged to write poems and prose by Rolleston. She was the first female recipient of an honorary doctorate from TCD in 1904. A member of the SPR from around 1901, she discussed the Mrs Thompson mediumship with Barrett in 1903 and served on committees of reference in the SPR. In her obituary Barrett wrote: “Her intimate knowledge of the Proceedings of the Society and her sound judgment rendered her opinion always worth having. But she was so modest and retiring that only those who knew her well could form a true estimate of the rare insight and the wide range of knowledge she possessed” (Barrett 1917-8: 49).

Thomas Henry Webb.

Enthusiastic user of the ouija board, with which he “obtained many communications purporting to come from deceased relatives” (“Society for Psychical Research. Dublin Section”: 64). Author (under name “T.H.W.”) of *Light on the Future: Being Extracts from the Note Book of a Member of the Society for Psychical Research, Dublin* (1917) which discussed ouija experiments and séances. Webb was a Quaker and advertising company director who lived at 80 Harcourt Street with his family. In one of his books Barrett refers to “a well-known and esteemed member of the Society of Friends and a friend of mine in Dublin, [who] has for several years past had a small private circle of sitters with the ouija board” (Barrett 1917: 187).

Reverend David Mullen.

Dublin-based Presbyterian minister.

Mrs Margaret O’Grady* (b.1852), née Fisher.

Daughter of Reverend William Alan Fisher, Rector of Kilmore, County Cork. Wife of the prominent writer and journalist Standish O’Grady (1846-1928). The couple shared an interest in the occult and the Cousins’ recalled that she was “thought to be very psychic” (Cousins and Cousins 1950: 117).

Mrs Margaret Hogg* (1852-1913) née Peace.

Married Jonathan Hogg in 1875, Governor of the Bank of Ireland (1901-2) and Deputy

Lieutenant for County Dublin.

Mrs Deemster Gill* (d.1935).

Lucinda Gill née Brooke, widow of T. Arthur Bell, of Marino Lodge, Killiney, remarried a Manx judge, John Frederick Gill, in 1892, at which ceremony Canon Carmichael officiated. Deemster Gill died in 1899 and she collected her husband’s writings on Manx folk-songs in 1912.

Reverend Charles William O’Hara Mease* (1856-1922).

Committee member. Dean of Chapel Royal and Canon of St. Patrick’s Cathedral.

Sir Lambert Ormsby* (1848-1923).

Committee member. Prominent Dublin surgeon and philanthropist, raised in New Zealand, worked at the Meath Hospital 1872-1923 (White and Foley 2009). Chaired the DSSPR Oliver Lodge reception in September, 1908.

Canon Frederick Falkiner Carmichael LL.D (1830-1919).

Committee member. Son of James Carmichael, Clerk of the Crown and Justice of the Peace for Tipperary, and brother of Rev. James Carmichael, Bishop of Montreal. Chaplain of the Magdalen Asylum (1865-1914), Dublin, lecturer in TCD, RDS council member, supporter of women’s right to vote, became Chancellor of Christchurch Cathedral in 1913. Popular preacher who gave lectures on ghosts to parishioners in Dublin in 1894 and 1907. Member of the SPR from around 1898.

Dean John Henry Bernard* (1860-1927).

Church of Ireland Archbishop of Dublin. Born in India, educated at TCD, became Dean of St. Patrick’s Cathedral in 1902. Warden of Alexandra College (1905-11), President of the RIA (1916-21), and prominent pragmatic unionist in the aftermath of the War of Independence. Became Provost of TCD in 1919 (Dempsey 2009).

Bishop James Bennett Keene* (1849-1919).

Church of Ireland Bishop of Meath (1897-1919) and member of the Senate of TCD. Member of SPR from 1894.

Sir Archibald Geikie* (1835-1924).

Scottish geologist and Fellow of the Society. Corresponded with Barrett

regarding dowsing in 1899 (Geikie to Barrett, November 7th, 1899, WFBP). Joined SPR around 1903.

Mrs Martha Russell* née Keown.

Second wife of Ulster unionist politician, Sir Thomas Wallace Russell (1841-1920) who was Vice-President of the Department of Agriculture and Technical Instruction (1907-18) (Loughlin 2009).

Dr. Bruce*.

Forbes Bruce (b.1859)? Lieutenant-Colonel in Royal Army Medical Corps and X-ray specialist. Born in Scotland, served during the Boer War and carried out X-rays during the Siege of Ladysmith (Vermeulen 2002). Mentioned as the “discoverer of the cause of Malta fever and of horse-sickness in South Africa” (“British Medical Association”). Like Barrett, Bruce lectured on the X-ray in Dublin. Listed as retired and living at 2 Earlsfort Place with his family in the 1911 Census.

Pierce Leslie Pielou (1870-1962).

Theosophist, Celticist, amateur archaeologist, astrologist, vegetarian, and supporter of animal welfare. Pielou was married to the sister of Margaret E. Cousins and collaborated with her in psychical research. Pielou worked as an accountant for Guinness’s and also collaborated with J.H. Cousins and Francis Sheehy-Skeffington on *The Pioneer* journal (“Obituary: Mr. P. L. Pielou”). Prominent figure, with Yeats, in the Irish Astrological Society (1922-c.40).

Reverend Ernest Savell Hicks (1877-1962).

Preacher and suffragist born in Lancashire. Presbyterian Minister at Unitarian Church, St. Stephen’s Green (1910-62). Author of various books on religion. In 1913 Hicks read a paper by himself and Barrett to the SPR entitled “Recent Experiments with the Ouija Board” which discussed the séances of a small circle of members of the Dublin Section. Author of “The Moral Aspects of Psychical Research”, *The Quest* (October, 1913).

Mr. Pemberton.

Gave a paper to the DSSPR in 1910.

Geraldine Grace de Robeck (b.1877).

From Naas, Co. Kildare, daughter of Commander de Robeck. Joined the SPR around 1905. Associated with the Ascendancy

hunting set. Gave a paper to the DSSPR in 1910 and authored of “Abnormal Phenomena in the Lives of the Saints”, *Occult Review*, (December, 1912).

Mr. Haslarn.

Gave a paper to the DSSPR in 1910.

Miss Miles.

Came from London to give a “most interesting” paper on “Telepathy at a Distance” in 1910 (“Dublin Section...1910”: 64).

John Ellard Gore* (1845-1910).

Vice-Chairman. Astronomer. Educated in TCD and worked as an engineer in India. Member of the RIA from 1875. Died suddenly in 1910 (Andrews 2009b).

James Henry Cousins (1873-1956) and **Margaret E. Cousins*** (1878-1954).

Theosophists and suffragists. Authors of the memoir *We Two Together* (1950). J.H. Cousins was a Committee member. Poet and playwright, shared with George Coffey and Fournier d’Albe an interest in the Irish Literary Revival. Worked briefly at the RCScI, lecturing in geography. James Joyce stayed with the Cousins’s in June 1904, but left in a huff, complaining of their theosophical proselytising and indigestion caused by a “a typhoid turnip” (cited in Mullin 2001: 78). Held séances at their house in Sandymount in 1909 attended by the English medium Alfred Vont Peters, Yeats, and Maude Gonne. Founded the third Dublin Lodge of the Theosophical Society in 1909 with his wife and Hanna and Francis Sheehy Skeffington; claimed Barrett’s interest in theosophy was aroused when he attended a lecture by Annie Besant in the Molesworth Hall, October 1909. Barrett intervened with the authorities to assist his wife, Margaret E. Cousins, née Gillespie, who went on hunger strike in Tullamore prison after she smashed-in the windows of Dublin Castle in a suffragist protest (Cousins and Cousins, 1950: 208-9). The Cousins’s emigrated to India in 1915.

Mrs Jane Coffey* (c.1847-1921).

Born Jane Sophia Frances L’Estrange, daughter of Sir George Burdett L’Estrange, she was associated with many philanthropic enterprises and involved in the Feis Ceoil festivals. One of the first women to enter the RCScI, she studied physics under Barrett.

Married George Coffey in 1885. Coffey, a Literary Revivalist, nationalist, and archaeologist, was an associate of Rolleston, Yeats, and J.H. Cousins. A member of the RIA, like Barrett he investigated caves with Thomas Plunkett in Fermanagh (Clarke 2009).

Miss Gleeson*.

Evelyn Gleeson (1855-1944). Prominent member of Irish Literary Society, worked with the Yeats sister's at Dun Emer Press (1902-8) (Murphy 1995: 86-144) (Lily Yeats shared with her brother an interest in the occult). Gleeson was a close friend of the botanist Augustine Henry, who became Professor of Forestry at the RCScI in 1913. In their correspondence they discussed ghosts, psychical research, and mentioned Barrett's writings on the subject. Gleeson was also a cousin of T.P. Gill, Secretary of the Department of Agriculture and Technical Education.

Charles J. Wilson* (b.1853).

Described as a barrister and widower in the 1911 Census. Address at 17 Pembroke Park, Dublin. Mentioned as a member of the American SPR in 1920.

Arthur Cortlandt MacGregor* (1867-1939).

Musician and Chairman of the Dublin and Wicklow Manure Company. Well known around Dublin ("Mr. Arthur C. MacGregor").

Rosa Mary Barrett* (1855-1936).

Social reformer, educationalist, suffragist, sister of William F. Barrett. Moved to Monkstown and then Kingstown with Barrett and their mother when he gained the Chair of Physics at the RCScI. 1911 Census records her as a Congregationalist (her brother was Church of Ireland). Founded the Irish section of the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children in 1889. Maintained an interest in psychical research; completed Barrett's study of Christian Science, *The Religion of Health* (1925) (Oldfield 2004; Clarke and Byrne 2009).

William Frederick Bailey* (1857-1917).

Lawyer and estates commissioner from Limerick. Lectured in TCD in the 1880s. Supporter of the Irish Literary Revival and Member of RIA, 1904 (Andrews 2009).

Mr* (1838-1920) and **Mrs Wellington Darley*** (d.1925).

Wellington Darley was a director of the Bank of Ireland and was associated with a variety of philanthropic causes. He was also Justice of the Peace, a supporter of welfare for animals, and was on the board of governors of the Meath Hospital. He lived with his wife, Anna Frances, at Violet Hill, Bray.

Lilla Mary Vanston* (1870-1959).

Sculptor, daughter of Reverend John T. Coffey. Member of the Gaelic League. Married to John S. Vanston, solicitor (Hourican 2009).

Mrs Trouton*.

Mrs Annie Trouton? Daughter of George Fowler, married Frederick Thomas Trouton in 1887. He was a physicist who worked at TCD and moved to University College Dublin in 1902 (Byrne 2009).

Mrs Wilkins*.

Charles Hubert Oldham* (1859-1926).

Studied experimental physics and law at TCD and became an economist. Worked with Rolleston on the *Dublin University Review* (McGee 2009). Member, with Barrett, of the Irish Protestant Home Rule Association.

Miss M. Guinness*.

Joined the SPR around 1899, lived in Rathfarnham according to her membership record.

Lady Edith Lyttelton* (1865-1948).

British social hostess and novelist, born Edith Sophy Balfour. Married Alfred Lyttelton, a sportsman and politician in 1892 (Lyttelton's first wife, Octavia Laura Tennant, was an early member of the SPR). A friend of Yeats, Lady Lyttelton increasingly turned to spiritualism following the death of her husband in 1913 and was frequently mentioned in SPR publications.

Lady Augusta Gregory* (1852-1932).

Writer and folklorist associated with the Irish Literary Revival. Barrett was among other signatories of her petition to secure Hugh Lane's art collection for Dublin in 1917. The death of Lane, her nephew, who went down with the *Lusitania* in 1915, inspired a series of séances to contact his spirit. She and Yeats participated enthusiastically in the clairvoyant search for Lane's will.

Maxwell Henry Close (1822-1903).

(Close died before the DSSPR was established, but he did have a long-term association with Barrett and psychical research). Geologist, scientist, clergyman, born in Dublin. Member of Royal Dublin Society, Royal Geological Society of Ireland, Treasurer of RIA 1878-1903. Published works on physics and astronomy (Lunney and Bohan 2009). Travelled to Fermanagh with Barrett as part of the 'Derrygonelly Poltergeist' case in 1877 (Barrett 1877). An early member of the SPR; collaborated with Barrett as part of the 'Reichenbach' Committee in Dublin (1882-83). Barrett wrote an obituary of Close in *JSPR* in which he praised him as a philanthropist, scholar, and revivalist of the Irish language. He noted that Close's interest in psychical research was "profound" (Barrett 1903-04: 135). Barrett included the name of Close in a list of acknowledgements in *Practical Physics* (1892), a text-book co-authored with his assistant William Brown.

W.B. Yeats (1865-1939).

Yeats was never named as a member of the DSSPR in the available sources. In his youth he displayed much interest in occultism and joined the Dublin Hermetic Society and the Dublin Lodge of the Theosophical Society in the 1880s. Many commentators in the past agreed in dating Yeats's interest in spiritualism and psychical research to 1911 (Hone 1962: 281; Moore 1973: 218) and he is recorded as having joined the SPR as an Associate Member in February 1913. Yet there is evidence that Yeats had been gravitating towards psychical research in Ireland from at least 1909, and it is highly probable that he was a member of Barrett's circle. Around March 1909 Yeats wrote: "I told my sister that I have offered, if the Dublin branch of the PRS would arrange it, to spend the night in the Baggot Street haunted house" (Yeats 1977: 185), a reference to the ghost-hunting with Fournier d'Albe referred to above.

Much of this new interest in spiritualism and psychical research can be put down to Yeats's gradual orientation away from the magical, occult, and esoteric activities associated with theosophy and the Order of the Golden Dawn (Ellmann 1961: 195-6). Yeats had always been an enthusiastic occultist and hermeticist, but while there was a wide spectrum of belief and

practice relating to supernatural and transcendental phenomena during the period, spiritualism and (especially) psychical research were very different enterprises to the esoteric groups that Yeats would have been long familiar with. Indeed, Yeats had had a frightening experience during a séance with Katherine Tynan in the 1880s which kept him from the area for quite some time (Brown 1999: 37).

Spiritualism emerged from the United States in 1848 and built upon previous patterns of research, much of it public and heavily publicised, into pseudo-scientific realms of knowledge such as mesmerism and phrenology. The stated aim of most spiritualists in Europe and the United States was to achieve contact, communicative or physical, with their dead loved ones. Typically, spiritualists sought to reconcile such incidents with science, through experimentation, observation, and recordings (photography; automatic and slate-writing; moulds and impressions). Psychical research emerged from this background in the 1880s with the stated aim of looking objectively at spiritualistic phenomena and gathering evidence and testimony relating to telepathy, ghost-seeing, and hallucinations (McCorristine 2010). In contrast to occultists, many psychical researchers were sceptical and agnostic.

The Theosophical movement also emerged from spiritualism, although its founder, Helena Blavatsky, later condemned séances and did not believe in the tenets of spiritualism. Although welcoming the establishment of the SPR in 1882, an investigation three years later which exposed some of the fraudulent activities of the theosophists, scuppered any sense of rapprochement between psychical research and occultist groups internationally. In Dublin the case was a little different, with evidence of some co-operation between the theosophists and the DSSPR in the Peters séances at the Cousins's house in 1909 (Lennon 2004: 213). Yeats's turn to spiritualism and psychical research from 1909 onwards correlates with his disenchantment with magical rites and awareness of the need for more evidence and experimentation in the area of the supernatural. The key words in psychical research were investigation, observation, and proof – factors merely in the background in most occultist circles.

While on a lecture tour in the United States in 1911, Yeats attended séances held by the medium Mrs. Chenoweth and became familiar with the psychical research work of J.H. Hyslop, former Professor of Logic and Ethics at the University of Columbia and a distinguished member of the American SPR. On October 8, 1913, Barrett presided as Hyslop delivered a paper to the DSSPR entitled “Psychical Research in America” at the Antiquaries Hall, 6 St. Stephen’s Green. Some three weeks later, on October 31, Yeats gave a lecture entitled “Ghosts and Dreams” at the same venue, at which Barrett also presided.

Around this time Barrett and Yeats shared an interest in the writings of the Swedish scientist and mystic Emmanuel Swedenborg (1688-1772): Barrett gave an address to the Swedenborg Society which was published in the *Contemporary Review* (July, 1912), and as a pamphlet in the same year while in 1912 Yeats began the research which would result in “Swedenborg, Mediums and the Desolate Places” (1914). Yeats and Barrett also shared friends in Hester Travers Smith (1868-1949), daughter of Edward Dowden, Professor of English at TCD, and Geraldine Cummins (1890-1969), a playwright and famous medium. Travers Smith became active as a medium in the winter of 1914 and claimed to have been contacted by the spirit of Hugh Lane just after the sinking of the *Lusitania* at a ouija séance attended by Savell Hicks and the playwright Lennox Robinson in May 1915. Barrett summarised the case in his *On the Threshold of the Unseen* (1917), a copy of which Yeats possessed (O’Shea 1985: 15). Barrett also wrote introductions to two of Travers Smith’s books, *Voices from the Void* (1919) (in which the case was discussed) and *Psychic Messages from Oscar Wilde* (1923). Yeats, Barrett, Dowden, and Cummins were all involved in the clairvoyant search for Lane’s will (Cummins 1939: 135), and Yeats is recorded as having visited London with his wife in December 1917 for this purpose. During this visit he wrote to Barrett and apologised for not being able to attend his dinner party in Surrey (Harper 1987: 75). A final connection is that of E.R. Dodds, the classical scholar and SPR member (President, 1961-3), who in his memoirs discusses ouija séances involving Robinson, Dowden, and Cummins. Through Yeats, Dodds became the secretary of the committee attempting to keep

Hugh Lane’s art collection in Dublin (Dodds 1977: 59).

Conclusion and Discussion

Undoubtedly, further research remains to be done in the area, yet examining this, admittedly incomplete, membership list of 48 (not including Close or Yeats) we can make some conclusions on the men and women attracted to psychical research in Edwardian Dublin.

- The membership (26 men and 22 women) reflects the similar gender make-up of the SPR membership (Walker 1990: 236).
- Psychical research mostly attracted members of the social and cultural elite in Dublin: 7 held titles and, like the Dublin Lodge of the Theosophical Society, members were predominantly Protestant (Mercier 1994: 80).
- The presence of 7 Protestant clergymen demonstrates a high level of interest in psychical research from this sector.
- Scientific, professional, and personal associates of Barrett gravitated towards psychical research (Rosa Barrett, Fournier d’Albe, Geikie, Hicks, Mrs Coffey, the Barlow’s, and the Cousins’s).
- Trinity College, Dublin, the Royal Irish Academy, the Royal Dublin Society, the Irish Literary Revival, and various philanthropic causes are frequent cross-references in this survey.
- Despite some political, cultural, and confessional differences, a significant number DSSPR members were suffragists or sympathetic to women’s education.
- Through Barrett and the DSSPR, Yeats was part of a thriving psychical research scene in Dublin before he joined the SPR in 1913.

There are some important discussion points emerging from these conclusions. Firstly, the question must be asked: considering the overwhelming interest in psychical research from Protestants and members of the cultural establishment, why were Catholics not attracted to the area? In the light of the limited data available and the nascent state of research into Irish spiritualism and psychical research (Cousins 2008) some suggestions can be made.

The Roman Catholic Church was traditionally hostile to all forms of occultism, mesmerism, and spiritualism, denouncing as anti-Christian any attempted “invocation of demons” and pronouncements in 1847, 1856, and 1866 warned Catholics against attending séances. Although referred to as “modern devil-

worship” by Church authorities (“Spiritism” 1867), spiritualism, with its denials of a personal devil, the Fall of man, and the damnation of the un-baptised, along with its frequently radical, utopian, and Protestant adherents, fundamentally represented an ideological challenge to Catholic doctrine and social policy. Many commentators, Catholic as well as Protestant, highlighted the moral and mental hazards of an interest in the otherworld in an era when hysteria and religious mania were common diagnoses (Benson 1907: 16; “Spiritualism” 1862). Implying subversive tendencies, an 1865 editorial in the *Irish Times* viewed the spread of spiritualism in the United States as akin to Fenianism (“Editorial”). All of these elements worked against any sympathetic interest in spiritualism among the Catholic intelligentsia. Where this did occur, as in the case of the English Jesuit Herbert Thurston (a friend of Barrett’s), the ecclesiastical authorities stepped in to censure it (Reynolds 1954: 361).

Aside from this confessional disinclination, prominent germination factors for a growth in spiritualism – interest in mesmerism and marginal science among native scientists and intellectuals – were lacking in Ireland. Sources relating to the arrival of spiritualism in Ireland are limited, but one commentator suggested that it was first introduced around 1857 by Captain Casement, who brought to Dublin “an uneducated medium from Lancashire, named Alexander. Neither the table-moving manifestations of this medium, nor the persuasion of the captain, had any influence beyond exciting a temporary interest with a few, and producing contempt and ridicule with most who witnessed his experiments” (MacDonnell 1871: 129). In 1860 a satirical hoax letter was addressed to the *Daily Express* purporting to come from John William Dunne, “the Rector of Kilkenny”, detailing some of the “morning séances” which he attended with his family and other members of the clergy (“Spiritualism in Ireland”). Conjuring and magic shows always attracted attention, and indeed the tour of the Davenport Brothers through Ireland in 1866, claiming to be able to contact spirits during séances, took on the character of an entertainment (Cooper 1867: 117-60). But on the popular level, unlike in England there was no tradition of a convergence of socialism or radicalism with spiritualism among the plebeian classes in

Ireland (Barrow 1986). A contemporary noted that it was “utterly disbelieved by the public; while the adherents may be included in a couple of dozen” (MacDonnell 1871: 130).

Access to Irish cultural institutions, with their relevant foreign publications and connection to British socio-intellectual networks, tended to be limited among Catholics. While Irish folklore was particularly rich in supernatural incidents, such phenomena were not typically interpreted according to psychical theories. This was largely the case for Marian apparitions in Ireland also. Roman Catholic thinking on the matter of séances and investigation of ghosts tended to stick to the hypotheses of necromancy or evil spirits. However, as late as 1919, one prominent Catholic philosopher was unsure about the official position on psychical research or passive attendance at séances (“Psychical Research. Debate at the Abbey Theatre”).

Preliminary research has found a few isolated cases of classic poltergeist phenomena (children present; objects hurled at onlookers; unexplained noises) in mid-Victorian Ireland, interestingly all in Ulster. One case from 1800, reported in 1850, describes supernatural rappings at a boarding school for girls in Coleraine (“J.A.S.” 1850). In 1865 the *Tyrone Constitution* reported on a narrative submitted by a police constable regarding disturbances at the M’Croy household near Mountfield (Thurston 1928: 55). In 1868 a spiritualist magazine picked up on an article in the *Derry Standard* reporting a supernatural disturbance at the household of a farmer named Speer in Tillymoan, outside Strabane, which caused local interest (“Haunting in Ireland” 1868). The most interesting poltergeist case to occur in Ireland during this period also occurred in Ulster and was thoroughly investigated and publicised by Barrett. In 1877 Barrett travelled to Derrygonnelly, Co. Fermanagh, with some colleagues from the RIA, to visit a Methodist family experiencing ghostly phenomena. Barrett attempted to trace the origins of the “diabolical hullabaloo” which, the father informed him, occurred nearly every night, and observed his daughters for trickery during the night: “At last, I mentally asked for a certain number of knocks: they were slowly and correctly given!” Barrett believed that such a link between mind and spirit gave him “just ground for believing that, after all, there might be here something in operation not dreamt of

in medical science, nor compatible with a purely materialistic philosophy” (Barrett 1877: 696).

One growth point for spiritualism in Europe and the United States, the doctrines of Swedenborg, almost exclusively attracted the interest of Protestant clergymen and writers in Ireland (Foster 2011; McCormack 1993). Yeats’s attempt to connect Swedenborgianism to native Irish folklore and popular belief was exceptional and a testament to his background, not the phenomena he examined (Yeats 1920). Protestants, especially clerics or those from a clerical or evangelical background were also more likely to be freethinkers or members of groups such as the DSSPR or the Irish Theosophical Lodge. Members of TCD were especially invited to the Davenport’s first séance held at the Queen’s Arms Hotel, Sackville Street, in 1866 (Cooper 1867: 125-7), while in 1875 it was claimed that there were “more than twenty clergymen in Dublin, to say nothing of certain scientific and philosophical professors in connection with the leading scholastic establishments of Ireland, who are not only willing but anxious to investigate Spiritualism” (“Saunders’s News Letter’ on Spiritualism”). It has been argued that this was because of Irish Protestants’ traditional interest in the occult and the supernatural: a reflection of their sense of political isolation alienation (Foster 1993) as well as their curiosity towards alternative modes of religious belief in the aftermath of Darwin’s theory of evolution and the rise of scientific naturalism (Guinness 2003). The DSSPR was also obviously an interesting social group to belong to with significant status and networking possibilities:

two provosts and one vice-provost of TCD (all clergymen) were high-ranking members.

However, in the case of the SPR, we do find many of the same factors influencing orientation towards psychical research. Most of the leaders of the SPR were sons of clergymen who grew to question their faith while its first president, Henry Sidgwick, helped found Newnham College, an institution for women, with his wife Eleanor Balfour. Much like the DSSPR, the SPR attracted prominent establishment and literary figures such as William Gladstone, Arthur Balfour, Alfred Tennyson, Mark Twain, and Henri Bergson. These similarities aside, the DSSPR is notable for the fact that many members combined interests in several concerns which operated in tandem with psychical research: these included liberal, philanthropic, Celtic revivalist, and feminist beliefs. Ultimately, perhaps one of the best ways to understand the origins, development, and demise of psychical research in Ireland (especially given the career of Barrett) is to examine the matter alongside the parallel history of “metropolitan science” in Victorian and Edwardian Ireland (McCorristine 2009; Whyte 1999). Both were oriented towards, and to a large extent dependent on, the strength of British institutions and cultural policy for oxygen and patronage, components which began to swiftly dissipate after 1913. The DSSPR was just one of the many groups in Dublin ‘clubland’ which had a mixed membership of fashionable society, local intelligentsia, and Protestant freethinkers, and which therefore had limited staying power after the war years and the emergence of a dominant Catholic nationalism.

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Shane McCorrstine is an IRCHSS CARA Postdoctoral Mobility Fellow at the Department of English, NUI Maynooth and the Scott Polar Research Institute, University of Cambridge. He has published on children’s literature, supernatural fiction, and Arctic exploration. His book is entitled *Spectres of the Self: Thinking about Ghosts and Ghost-seeing in England, 1750-1920*. (Cambridge UP, 2010).