

# Hester Travers Smith (Dowden)

Hester Travers Smith (née Dowden) (1868–1949 ) was a psychical researcher and automatist who wrote books about her experiences, notably about alleged contact with the deceased writer Oscar Wilde. She impressed the physicist and psychical researcher [William F Barrett](#), who wrote an introduction to her book *Voices from the Void*.

## Life and Career

Hester Travers Smith (who also wrote under her maiden name Dowden) was born in Ireland into a family that had connections with both [WB Yeats](#) and [Bram Stoker](#). She moved to London in 1891 to study music, then returned to care for her father. After his death, and following an unsuccessful marriage, she moved back to London, becoming increasingly interested in psychical research through the use of a Ouija board.

Travers Smith's experimental circle, started in the 1910s and including William Barrett on occasions, sat once or twice a week using the Ouija board in an attempt to make contact with discarnate entities (referred to as 'controls' and 'communicators').<sup>[2]</sup> The participants worked blindfolded to preclude any fraudulent movement of the pointer; notes of answers to questions were taken down by a third party not otherwise involved in the proceedings. The method employed was to use two operators, for best results one of each sex,<sup>[3]</sup> with the letters placed under a sheet of glass, not necessarily in any specific order and previously unseen by the participants.

Messages were conveyed that seemed to suggest evidence of some sort of post-death continuation. In one particularly striking case the name was spelled out of a cousin of one of the sitters, an officer serving in the trenches in France. When the sitter asked, do you know who I am, the board first spelled her name, then the message 'Tell mother to give my pearl tie-pin to the girl I was going to marry. I think she ought to have it.' The name of the girl was then spelled out, an unusual name unknown to anyone present, also an address in London; however, a letter sent to that address was returned and it was assumed the message was fictitious. Some months later the war office returned his belongings, among which was found a will in which he identified as his next of kin the first name and surname of the woman in the scripts, also the pearl tie pin. This was considered significant evidence of survival, since none of the relevant information was known to any of the sitters and could not be attributed to telepathy.<sup>[4]</sup>

Travers Smith herself remained uncertain about the true origin of the communications, believing that telepathy and subconscious activity among living people might be involved.

I feel I cannot have satisfied anyone; not the eager believer – for any faith I possess rests on very small foundations; not the keen student of psychic

matters – for I cannot say that I think these studies should absorb anyone while the world provides work to be done which brings in so much richer results.<sup>[5]</sup>

Her book *Voices from the Void* described sittings held over six years.<sup>[6]</sup>

## Oscar Wilde Scripts

Influenced by her friend [Geraldine Cummins](#), a medium and automatist, Travers Smith attempted automatic writing, and produced scripts purporting to come from the deceased playwright Oscar Wilde.<sup>[7]</sup> In her analysis she considered the possibility of cryptomnesia, the unconscious memory of details read in books and elsewhere, but found convincing the ‘the reconstruction of personality’ over a period of time, rather than ‘trifling details’ of evidence.<sup>[8]</sup> For their part, despite problems of interpretation, commentators of the Society for Psychical Research viewed the scripts as a contribution to understanding the phenomenon of automatism.<sup>[9]</sup>

## Other Scripts

Travers Smith also collaborated with [Frederick Bligh Bond](#) in his investigation of the history of Glastonbury Abbey,<sup>[10]</sup> using automatic writing to gain details ostensibly given by eleventh century monks about relics. To the author Percy Allen she provided scripts apparently supporting Allen’s claim that plays attributed to William Shakespeare were actually written by his contemporary Edward de Vere, Earl of Oxford.<sup>[11]</sup> Another series of scripts ostensibly originated with the journalist [William Thomas Stead](#), a victim of the sinking of *RMS Titanic*.<sup>[12]</sup> During World War II she scripted messages from her ‘control’ Johannes about the personalities of the main war leaders.<sup>[13]</sup>

Melvyn Willin

## Selected Publications

*Voices from the Void* (1919). New York: E.P. Dutton & Company.

[\*Psychic Messages from Oscar Wilde\*](#) (1923). London: T. Werner Laurie.

How I received Oscar Wilde’s ‘Spirit Play’ (1928). *The Graphic*, 119 (10 March), 404.

*Life Eternal* (1933, with W.T. Stead). London: Wright & Brown.

## Literature

Allen, P. (1947, with H. Dowden). *Talks with Elizabethans Revealing the Mystery of ‘William Shakespeare’*. London: Rider & Company.

Barrett, W.F. (1918). *On the Threshold of the Unseen*. New York: E.P. Dutton & Company.

- Bentley, E. (1951). *Far Horizon: A Biography of Hester Dowden: Medium and Psychic Investigator*. London: Rider & Company.
- Bligh Bond, F. (1932). *The Gospel of Philip the Deacon*. New York: Macoy.
- Dodd, A. (1943). *The Immortal Master*. London: Rider & Company.
- Dowden, H. (1919). *Voices from the Void*. New York: E.P. Dutton & Company.
- Dowden, H. (1928). How I received Oscar Wilde's 'Spirit Play'. *The Graphic*, 119, 10 March, 404.
- Hill, J.A. (1919). Review: *Voices from the Void* by Hester Travers Smith. *Journal of the Society for Psychical Research* 19, 71-72.
- Sidgwick, E. (1924). Review: *Psychic Messages from Oscar Wilde*. *Journal of the Society for Psychical Research* 24, 186-96.
- Soal, S.G. (1926). Note on the 'Oscar Wilde' Script. *Journal of the Society for Psychical Research* 23, 110-112.
- Stead, W.T. (1933, with H. Dowden). *Life Eternal*. London: Wright & Brown.
- Travers Smith (1923). *Psychic Messages from Oscar Wilde*. London: T. Werner Laurie.
- Willin, M.J. (1999). Paramusicology: An Investigation of Music and Paranormal Phenomena (PhD thesis). University of Sheffield.

## Endnotes

- [1] Dowden (1919).
- [2] Dowden (1919), 13-14.
- [3] [Author's note]. An interesting comparison is to be made with similar positive results identified in ganzfeld experiments. For instance see Willin (1999), 48.
- [4] Barrett (1918), 184-86.
- [5] Dowden (1919), 156-57.
- [6] Hill (1919), 71-72.
- [7] Travers Smith (1923).
- [8] Dowden (1928), 404.
- [9] Soal (1926), 110-112; Sidgwick (1924), 186-96.
- [10] Bligh Bond (1932).
- [11] Allen (1947).
- [12] Stead/Dowden (1933).

[\[13\]](#) Cited in Bentley (1951).

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