
Book Review

Who is Eileen Garrett? A review of *Behind the Medium's Mask*

Elisabeth J. C. Warwood

Behind the Medium's Mask: Eileen Garrett's Shadow Self

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This is a very surprising book based upon four years of archival inquiry into the life of the famous Irish-born medium Eileen J. Garrett. Like most people in parapsychology, I thought I knew a bit about Garrett. I had been the recipient in 2008 of the Eileen Garrett Grant, as a “promising student”. This award (my first, which made me very proud!) was presented to me by the Parapsychology Foundation (PF), an organization co-founded by Garrett, that played a tremendous role in supporting parapsychology worldwide. Also in 2008, I was invited to attend the PF-sponsored *Utrecht II: Charting the Future of Parapsychology* congress. There I met for the first time most of my heroes and several of my future colleagues, including Garrett’s daughter Eileen Coly and grand-

daughter Lisette Coly. I also encountered reference to Garrett and the PF among the archives of the Institut Métapsychique International in Paris, because PF had hosted several symposiums about parapsychological topics in the south of France where Garrett loved to live.

But I was wrong about Garrett. Prior to Lis Warwood's detailed biography, my knowledge of her was based upon an origin story that I did not recognize as being fabricated. In fact, "Eileen Jeanette Garrett" is a fictional character constructed during the Roaring Twenties, with a false background narrative, like a role-play. This character was reinforced through three memoirs or autobiographies which themselves contain contradictions. And, in reality, the first of those, published in 1939, was written by the American psychologist Margaret Naumburg, who claims to have had the role of a ghostwriter, with an accompanying introduction to the book under her own name being summarily rejected at the last moment. Naumburg alerted J. B. Rhine to these issues in their correspondence that Warwood includes on pp. 235–243.

Australian historian of spiritualism and psychical research Elisabeth J.C. Warwood applied a simple methodology, that is, to check every fact. She begins each chapter with a synthesis of Garrett's claims from "her" books and interviews, then examines the available archives in Great Britain and abroad, mostly through online government documents, including birth, marriage, and death records. She incorporates images of many documents in her text. Warwood explains painstakingly that she found almost nothing to support Garrett's fictionalized claims. The reality is that she was born Emily Jane Savage on 14 March 1892 and not on 17 March 1893, the date on which Garrett celebrated her birthday. Her parents did not commit suicide. She did not lose three infant sons, and she did not marry three times, etc.

Every available source about Garrett's life is then scrutinized, from her Irish childhood (pp. 31–90), her early years in England (pp. 91–115), her other marriages and business ventures (pp. 117–163), to her path to fame and fortune (pp. 165–195). Warwood then initiates a discussion of the implications of Garrett's storytelling in relation to the historical documents (pp. 197–213) and aligns them chronologically (pp. 215–221).

Warwood explains that Garrett's fantastical stories are not false memories or dissociative identity, because Savage/Garrett showed knowledge of the genuine facts of her origins and life until adulthood, when she created a worthy background behind her new activity as a trance medium.

What may be shocking for Garrett's supporters is that some of the paranormal and tragic experiences that she claimed had shaped her mediumship have no historical basis. For instance, when she recalled the apparition of lost relatives at specific points in time, when in fact they died years later, she loses all her credibility.

What kind of medium was she? The famous case of the airship R-101 (pp. 183–195) played a pivotal role in the celebrity of Garrett because she was the medium in séances where defunct members of the crew explained why the airship met its tragic fate. But as Warwood reports, this case has lost much of its value as survival evidence because Garrett could have been informed of the technical aspects that led to the disaster years before it happened.

How do we reconcile the facts revealed through Warwood's historical work with the sympathetic view we may have of this Irish medium? Endorsements on the book's back cover raise questions with implications well beyond the scope of Warwood's book. Professor Emeritus Adrian Parker (currently SPR President) interpreted Garrett's discrepancies and lies as a kind of "fantasy proneness" that may be "an intricate part of mediumship". Roy Stemman, author and former editor of *Psychic News*, writes that this book opens the door to a total "reassessment of Garrett's abilities, motives and influence in the world of parapsychology". Indeed, this book may be akin to a bomb detonating with respect to Garrett's legacy.

Notwithstanding the shock of reading the lies and discrepancies revealed page after page, we cannot ignore the importance of Garrett and the Parapsychology Foundation as the preeminent sponsors of parapsychological research worldwide in the seven decades since 1951. Though everything regarding Garrett's career, reputation, and performances is now fragilized, Garrett's life since 1930 must be reconsidered to separate fact from fiction.

Behind the Medium's Mask ends with what could be the best appendices I have ever read. Special mention of Appendix E, Avenues for Further Research (pp. 271–303), is warranted. It provides a list of archives that may contain relevant material about some of the prominent individuals who interacted with Garrett, including many who explored her psychic abilities: Adolf Meyer, Hereward Carrington, Anita Mühl, Whately Carington, William Brown, William McDougall, Joseph Banks Rhine, Joseph Gaither Pratt, Cornelius Traeger, Mrs. K. M. Goldney and S. George Soal, Nandor Fodor, Andrija Puharich, Ira Progoff, Aldous Huxley and Humphry Osmond, Montague Ullman, and Lawrence LeShan. Rarely does a historical researcher offer to the research community at large what she has found but which need further investigations. Warwood's welcome sharing of these treasures is intended to stimulate researchers to undertake detailed studies of the last four decades of the life and career of Eileen Garrett.

In our post-truth era, historians and other scholar researchers are not short of work. This book should be considered in a larger context, as many mediums (e. g., Eusapia Maria, later known as "Palladino") and even researchers are trickster half-fictional characters when it comes to their back stories. Rather than thinking that this aura of lies negates parapsychological performance, it may be part of a "social elusiveness" that feeds the phenomena (Evrard,

2019). Frederic W.H. Myers (1903) pointed out the mythopoetic function of the subliminal self, applied for example by mediums to generate characters (deceased, divine, or even extraterrestrial) that are both credible and fantastic. If such a function is augmented in certain individuals, we can suspect that it is also used to help them rewrite their own biographies, even if it means losing themselves in the process. More broadly, parapsychologist François Favre asserted that only the present is real: the future and the past belong to the imaginary (Favre & Garnier, 2025). It is always possible to rework them for one's own purposes. Emily Jane Savage's true story, then, opens the door to an entirely different metaphysics.

Acknowledgements

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