Sheffield Hallam University

Scared to death: fatal encounters with ghosts

CLARKE, David <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-6604-9419>

Available from Sheffield Hallam University Research Archive (SHURA) at:

https://shura.shu.ac.uk/6377/

This document is the Draft Version

Citation:

CLARKE, David (2013). Scared to death: fatal encounters with ghosts. Contemporary legend, 3 (2). (Submitted) [Article]

Copyright and re-use policy

See http://shura.shu.ac.uk/information.html

Sheffield Hallam University Research Archive
http://shura.shu.ac.uk

SCARED TO DEATH: Fatal Encounters with Ghosts*

DAVID CLARKE

Sheffield Hallam University, U.K.

The phrases "scared to death" and "frightened to death" are firmly established in the English language. When people use one or other of these phrases it is usually to describe, in a metaphorical rather than a literal sense, a shocking or terrifying experience, often but not always of supernatural origin. My own collection of memorates includes examples "I nearly died from fright" and "it felt as if someone had walked over my grave" (Clarke 2000). These phrase/s were not accidental, but were used to articulate actual psychological and physiological reactions or sensations experienced by the individuals reporting supernatural experiences.

Ominous ghosts and revenants

The fear of ghosts and revenants is a universal feature of folk belief in most parts of the world. There are literary antecedents for the terror and fear described in some contemporary narratives. In 1793 a Northampton clergyman, the Reverend E. Gillespy, wrote that "nothing can affect the human mind with greater terror than the dead of an interview with the souls of deceased persons" (cited in Davies 2007: 42-3). Commonly recorded sensations include feeling one's hair stand on end or skin crawl, the expansion of the eyeballs, a rapid increase in heartbeat, a drop in body temperature and/or the chattering of the teeth. Again there are antecedents for these that may have influenced the evolution of both language and belief. In the Book of Job 4:15 Eliphaz says that when "a spirit passed before my face the hair of my flesh stood up." In the 18th century, a Welsh independent minister, Edmund Jones, describing a typical ghostly experience said of an informant, "his hair moved upon his head, his heart panted and beat violently, his flesh trembled, he felt not his cloaths about him" (Davies 2007:43).

In many cultures the fear of ghosts is often linked to their perceived malevolence. Medieval English texts refer to revenants that emerge from their tombs to spread death and pestilence amongst the living. The threat they posed to the community was often dealt with by burning or staking the corpse (Simpson 2003). In post-medieval folklore ghosts replace wandering corpses but the link with disease and death continues. The *Type-Motif Index of Folktales of England and North America* includes "meeting a ghost causes death" (E265.3) and its sub-

motif "meeting a ghost causes misfortune/sickness" (Baughman 1966: 141). Motif E574 refers to "appearance of ghost serves as a death omen" (Baughman 1966: 193). In English folklore there is a category of ghost known as the wraith (German *doppelganger*, "double walker"). This is an apparition of someone still alive and appears at the time of the person's death, often as a sign to close friends and relatives. To see one's own wraith was a sure sign of impending death and in the British Isles this belief is old and "strongly held" (Simpson and Roud 2000: 397). Gillian Bennett collected two contemporary stories of this type during her research in Manchester, including this example from 1981:

"Some years ago, it was at the end of the First World War. My husband was quite young and he was away with his older sister – on holiday or something. And the young man his sister was engaged to appeared before them in the bedroom, as plainly as anything in his uniform. He said it was just as if he was almost there! And he'd been killed just at that time in the War!" (Bennett 1987:55).

There are numerous examples of malevolent ghosts that bring death and misfortune in English folklore. In Herefordshire a man who met "Old Taylor's ghost" never recovered from the experience and 'soon died from the effects of his fright' (Leather, 1912: 32). The sighting of a female ghost, in white or black dress, was traditionally regarded as ominous but "often the appearance is not recognised as a death omen until the death is reported by other means" (Baughman, 1966: 193). Ghosts in the form of animals are another common death omen. The appearance of black dogs or, even more ominously, packs of spectral hounds, was feared in parts of England and the Welsh border (Simpson, 1976: 89-90). A pack of spectral hounds known as the 'Wild Hunt' or Wish Hounds haunt Dartmoor where they gallop across the moors on stormy nights, led by the devil. Anyone unfortunate enough to meet the pack "will die within the year and anyone trying to follow out of curiosity, will be lured to a nasty end" (St Leger-Gordon 1965: 28). Belief in the Wish Hounds persisted within living memory. In Derbyshire and Yorkshire, a revenant known as the *barghast* was described as "a being which resembles a large black dog, having eyes like saucers" that frequented crossroads at midnight. Meeting such a creature was ominous: "a woman who saw a barghast near 'three lane ends' [at Holmesfield, near Sheffield] said it was invisible to her sister, who died a month afterwards" (Addy, 1895: 137).

Traditional beliefs concerning death omens may be a product of the changes in the social function of ghosts. During the medieval period the Roman Catholic church taught that

revenants were the souls of the dead trapped in purgatory or corpses reanimated through the agency of the devil or his demons. Before the Reformation major changes had occurred both in Christian doctrine and popular belief about the returning dead. By the 17th century the concept of "the purposeful ghost" had become widespread and revenants always had a reason for their appearance: either to pass on warnings, to solve crimes, restore ill-gotten goods or torment evil-doers (Bennett 1999; Simpson 2003). This category of revenant remains popular in contemporary literature, from the Gothic novels of the 19th century to present day TV and film. The plot of Susan Hill's novel *The Woman in Black* (Hill 1983), revolves around events in a fictional village set in northern England. A female spectre attached to a lonely house returns to exact revenge for her child's accidental death. A junior solicitor from London, Arthur Kipps, is summoned to attend the funeral of the house's sole inhabitant. During his inquiries he discovers that residents of Crythin Gifford fear the appearance of the ghost because it signifies of the impending death of a child from the village. Hill drew upon the 19th century literary tradition established by Dickens, M.R. James and Henry James in the creation of her ghost and writes that "…my ghost returns to exact revenge and it is the nature of revenge that it is never satisfied; and so, loss and grief lead the woman in black on…She cannot let go, and her revenge is an evil that continues to be visited on Crythin Gifford" (Hill, 2012).

The Hound of the Baskervilles Effect

In Arthur Conan Doyle's novel *The Hound of the Baskervilles,* Charles Baskerville suffers a fatal heart attack, apparently because he is seized by terror following the appearance of the phantom hound that stalks the grounds of his ancestral home (Doyle 2001 [1903]). Frayling notes that Doyle based his story on existing traditions concerning the black dog that haunted Dartmoor, where he set the fictional Baskerville Hall (Frayling 2001:xvi). Before his success as a writer Doyle practised as a doctor. It is therefore likely he would have been aware that his character Charles Baskerville, who had chronic heart disease, would also be susceptible to cardiac arrest induced by stress. The story of his death may have been based on a mixture of Doyle's knowledge of medicine and folklore, in that "Sir Charles's superstitious fear of an avenging, spectral hound was shared and reinforced by his neighbours" (Phillips et al 2001:1444).

In a study published by the *British Medical Journal,* Dr David Phillips of the University of California examined computerised death certificates issued between 1973 and 1988 to

determine whether cardiac death rates among people with Chinese and Japanese backgrounds peaked on days that are considered unlucky or uncanny. In Mandarin, Cantonese and Japanese, the words "death" and "four" are pronounced almost identically and the number evokes feelings of "discomfort and apprehension" because of its links with death, disaster and malevolent revenants (Phillips et al 2001: 1443). The "Hound of the Baskervilles effect" suggested that cardiac mortality rates among the Chinese and Japanese populations surveyed peaked on the fourth of the month, exceeding those of other American citizens by a measurable degree. Phillips concluded that "excess cardiac mortality on 'unlucky' days are consistent with the hypothesis that cardiac mortality increases on psychologically stressful occasions" (Phillips et al 2001: 1443).

The methodology used by Phillips has been challenged (Smith 2002) and has been tested by a separate study of male and female death rates in the Hong Kong Chinese community. Panesar and Graham (2012) found no evidence of increased cardiac mortality not only on the fourth but also on two other "unlucky" dates in the Chinese calendar. This study retrospectively examined the number of deaths in the first and second two week periods of the seventh lunar months of 1995-2000. In Chinese tradition the first 14 days of the lunar ghost month is a hazardous period when the "gates of hell" are open and hungry revenants haunt the living. Although no significant differences were identified in death rates between this period and control month periods, the research did find that significantly fewer women died overall in the first fortnight of the seventh lunar month. Panesar and Graham attributed this finding to a desire among Chinese women to "postpone death until after the hungry ghosts have been fed" (Panesar and Graham 2012: 319).

Empirical evidence for a link between cardiac death rates, psychological stress and shared cultural beliefs relating to supernatural remains elusive. However, ghosts continue to instil fear in both Chinese and Western folk belief. Traditions that explain ghost experiences as unlucky omens provided the context whereby communities could explain the cause of sudden and unexplained deaths before medical knowledge of conditions such as congenital heart disease was widespread.

There is anecdotal evidence from the medical literature to suggest that extreme fear and anxiety alone can be sufficient to cause the death of individuals who have pre-existing chronic medical conditions. From 1965 case studies of deaths attributed to fear triggered a lively exchange of correspondence between doctors contributing to the *British Medical*

Journal. A number of cases that resulted from this exchange were collected and published by Dr J.C. Barker of London in his book *Scared to Death* (Barker 1968). He became interested in the subject after reading case notes relating to a Canadian woman who, in apparently perfect health, died at the age of 43 following a relatively minor surgical operation. Before the operation she told her consultant that she knew she was going to die at the age of 43 because she had been told she would by a fortune-teller when she was five years old (Elkington et al 1965:363-64). Barker concluded that in cases where patients display signs of fear or anxiety, death could be precipitated as a direct result of powerful suggestions implanted in the mind, as in the prediction made by the fortune teller in the Canadian case study. The neurocardiological mechanisms that trigger such extreme reactions in some individuals have also been implicated in voodoo deaths (Cannon 1942, Samuels 2007).

Death from Fright in 19th century Britain

Cases of death from fright attributed to fear or terror induced by a ghost experience are, if the evidence is sufficiently robust, likely to be recorded on death certificates. In Britain coroners have been responsible for convening inquests where the cause of death is unknown or "violent or unnatural". During the 19th century juries frequently heard from witnesses and examined medical evidence before returning a verdict. Today juries are used only in cases where a person has died either in custody, through medical neglect or in the workplace (Hanna and Dodd, 2012: 191-92). If beliefs concerning death from fright have evolved as a result of "ghost" experiences, or traditions reflecting such experiences, it was hypothesised that evidence for these should exist in the records of inquests.

As few records of coroners' court proceedings have survived from this period my research relied upon contemporary newspaper reports of inquests. The author conducted a keyword search of British 19th century newspapers for examples of death from fright recorded either as the cause, or a contributory factor, as the cause of death. The British Newspaper Archive currently allows keyword searches of 200 city and county titles published between 1800-1900 (British Library/BrightSolid 2012 – last accessed 24 August 2012). A search under the phrase "frightened to death" resulted in several hundred results including accounts of death from fright attributed to a range of unusual causes including lightning and storms, the intervention of burglars, bailiffs, fortune tellers, cats, elephants and even whales. An advanced search using the phrase paired with the words "ghost" and "apparition" reduced the number of results. Eliminating those accounts that did not refer to formal inquest proceedings reduced

the number of results to a core sample of 12. The earliest is dated 1814 and the most recent 1897.

From this sample there were five cases of alleged death by fright attributed, in evidence heard by coroners' courts, to the appearance of a "ghost" or other supernatural cause. The attribution of cause and effect to a supernatural origin was, in all five examples, made either by relatives of the deceased or from witnesses on oath. For example, in 1841 an inquest was held in Bristol on the body of an "aged labourer", Patrick Hayes, who died after falling down stairs at his lodgings at The Fortune of War on Marsh Street in Bristol. Mary Croker, wife of the landlord, testified that sometime after midnight she heard the deceased falling down stairs from the second to the first storey of the building. When she called out to ask who it was he replied "It is me, and I am dead." Questioned on oath, Mrs Croker told the coroner: "I rather think he saw the ghost which infects the house. It is the ghost of a lady in silk and has been troublesome to some former lodgers. Two or three lodgers have been killed in the same house, no doubt frightened from the same cause. I have never seen the ghost myself." The coroner did not refer to Mrs Croker's unusual suggestion in his summing up and recorded a verdict of accidental death (*London Evening Standard*, 1841).

In September 1889 an inquest on the body of a young woman, Anna Hanks, in Greenwich, London, heard evidence that she had died following the appearance of a cloud of "thick white smoke" in her bedroom. Her brother told an inquest the "smoke seemed to follow her hand, and there were sparks in it." Hanks fell to the floor and the smoke disappeared. In his testimony her brother said he believed the smoke was a "ghostly sign." The inquest heard that a post-mortem examination "showed clearly the death was due to fright and there was no explanation of the mysterious phenomena" (*Sunderland Echo*, 1889).

Another inquest held in 1894 in Somerset on the body of Elizabeth Annie Bishop, 17, a servant girl, heard evidence that before her death she had repeatedly reported seeing the ghost of her master's brother who had been lost in a shipping accident. These experiences frightened her so much that her employers could not induce her to leave her room. According to evidence heard at the inquest, shortly before her death she said "she had seen the ghost of her cousin, who had been dead for two years". The verdict in this case was that Bishop "died in a fainting fit, brought on by excessive fear" (*Bristol Mercury*, 1894).

A similar case was reported three years later in Rochester, Kent. The naked body of Jane Packham, 35, the wife of a police officer, was found on the foreshore of a river at Upnor,

with her clothes piled under a bush on the shore. At the inquest the coroner heard evidence that several months earlier, at night, Mrs Packham had been frightened by having seen a ghost while she was looking out of the window of her home in Rochester. Subsequently she became "extremely nervous, ill and strange in her manner." The verdict in her case was "found drowned" (*Sheffield Telegraph*, 1897).

The Campo Lane Ghost

The most evidential example unearthed by this research concerns the Campo Lane ghost that was linked with the death of a middle-aged woman in Sheffield, Yorkshire, early in 1855. According to a contemporary report in *The Sheffield Times* "…this ghost story is one of the prettiest we have heard for some time…. It has appeared to three persons. The first it alarmed; the second it threw into fits; and third it killed. What more can be needed to convince the most sceptical?" (*Sheffield Times* 1855a)

This weekly newspaper was one of three published in the city that devoted considerable space to coverage of the death from fright of 48-year-old Hannah Rallinson [1]. She was the wife of labourer John Rallison and they rented a room in the Park district of the town. A year before her own death, the couple's eldest son died in a Sheffield colliery accident. Both Hannah and John were members of the Church of Latter Day Saints or Mormons [2]. According to contemporary newspaper accounts, a short time before her death she was introduced by a fellow Mormon, John Favell, to a young widow, Harriet Ward. A writer in the *Sheffield & Rotherham Independent* said of her: "…of all the young women we have come in contact with for many a day, not one appears to us so likely to see a ghost as Ward, about whose appearance and demeanour there is a wildness indicative of an uncommon exuberance of imagination" (*Sheffield & Rotherham Independent* 1855). When in February 1855 Favell along with his wife and her sister rented a tenement in Campo Lane, they brought Ward with them as a lodger. The property rented by the Favell family consisted of first floor shop and a cellar kitchen. Ward's husband died some years earlier and newspapers noted that she claimed to have received frequent visitations from his ghost. She was also a convert to spiritualism and had been present during "spirit rappings" [3].

Immediately on moving into Campo Lane the Favells were disturbed during the night by "strange sounds which might have their origin in supernatural agency." The family "set it down as the effects of the imagination." Nevertheless they grew so fearful that none would venture downstairs into the cellar kitchen after dark. However, at midnight on Saturday, 24

February, Harriet Ward entered the cellar on an errand. A loud scream was heard and the Favells rushed downstairs to find her leaning against a table, her features rigid and her eyes fixed upon a point in the room where she claimed a ghost could be seen. The Favells told her they could see nothing. Ward fainted and on her recovery she described the apparition as "a grim-featured old woman wearing a long white nightgown and a full-bordered cap" (*Sheffield Times* 1855b).

Ward reported seeing this apparition five times during the next 24 hours whilst awake and in her dreams. In one vivid dream the woman in white led her to "a purse of gold", buried under the flagstones of the cellar floor, whereupon her landlord John Favell took out the purse and said: "That's all we want, let the old ghost come now" (*Sheffield Times* 1855b). Ward's visions continued on the Sunday, when John and Hannah Rallison and their landlady, Mrs Johnson, visited to lunch with the Favells. During the meal, Ward declared she could see the ghost on the cellar steps. On this occasion the apparition displayed bloodstains on its face and neck. Her screams brought John Favell running down the cellar steps, at which point his feet appeared to touch the ghost's head. Again, according to a newspaper account he saw nothing "as the superstition runs that only a few people are gifted with the power to see ghosts" (*Sheffield & Rotherham Independent* 1855). Ward said the ghost appeared to disappear in the same corner of the cellar kitchen where she had dreamed of buried treasure.

Later on Sunday afternoon, 25 February, Favell, Rallison and Ward attended a church meeting at the Mormon Hall of Science, where the Campo Lane ghost was the main topic of conversation. A larger group, including church elders, returned to Favell's residence in the evening. By this point Ward's dream of buried treasure appears to have become entwined with pre-existing ghost beliefs. As a journalist remarked: "of course, there could be no ghost without a murder…and therefore all the gossips have declared that the white lady's aim is to obtain a Christian burial and bring to justice, if still living, the perpetrators of the crime" (*Sheffield & Rotherham Independent* 1855). The idea that treasure, or the body of a murder victim, lay beneath the floor of the cellar kitchen, led John Favell to begin removing flagstones from the floor of the cellar. Outside in Campo Lane, a crowd began to gather.

What happened next was described in proceedings at the inquest presided over by Sheffield coroner Henry Badger. The jury at the inquest was told that as midnight approached a group of two dozen people, including Harriet Ward, the Favells and the Rallisons were present in the first floor shop. Annoyed by the crowd growing outside, Mrs Favell asked her sister to

cover the window of the cellar with a blind. According to the inquest proceedings, fearing what she might see on the cellar steps, she hesitated. At this point Hannah Rallison took the blind and went downstairs, accompanied by her landlady, Mrs Johnson. After fixing it she turned around to face the cellar steps and was immediately seized by fear. According to the *Sheffield & Rotherham Independent* account Hannah initially fainted but regained consciousness for a brief interval during which she said "she had seen a female form dressed in white, on the stairs; that it seemed to approach her suddenly, became a substance without form, and vanished as it rushed past her" (*Sheffield & Rotherham Independent* 1855).

As friends and relatives attempted to revive the unconscious woman in the first floor room, Harriet Ward announced that she could see the ghost of the white lady at the top of the stairs. She claimed the apparition opened its white night-dress to reveal deep gashes in its neck and blood-stains. Challenged in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Ghost to say why it troubled her, the ghost made no reply but beckoned for Ward to follow (4). At this point Ward began to communicate telepathically with a spirit that only she could see. The spirit told her it was the restless soul of Elizabeth Johnson, murdered by her nephew, William Dawson, on 26 March 1722 and buried deep beneath the cellar "in a watery grave". The final message was: "The garret and the cellar are now marked with my blood. You must quit this house, because William [Dawson] will trouble you if you don't." The conversation ended with the sudden disappearance of the ghost, "whereupon [Ward] fainted and remained insensible for about a quarter of an hour." (*Sheffield Times* 1855b *Sheffield & Rotherham Independent* 1855, *Sheffield Free Press*, 1855).

Hannah Rallison was removed from the premises in a horse-drawn cab. She was taken to her home where she died the following afternoon. At the inquest on 27 February the jury questioned a number of those who were present at the scene in Campo Lane. The jury members "could not make anything of the ghost story" and returned a verdict of death through natural causes. Rallison was described by the coroner as "a strong, healthy woman, labouring under no disease as far as is known" but he concluded her death had "certainly been caused by the fright she had received on the previous day, up to which time she was in perfect health and spirits." Hannah's death certificate, held by Sheffield City Registry Office, records the cause as "…sudden death in a fit believed to have been brought on by fright" (see Figure 1).

Contemporary accounts mention that rumours and gossip circulating in Sheffield claimed her ghost experiences were actually inspired by Satanic forces [5]. Shortly after the inquest verdict it was reported that Ward had been excommunicated by a unanimous vote of the Mormon congregation who had decided "the apparition… emanated from his Satanic majesty, and hint that wonderful things may be expected in these marvellous times" (*Sheffield & Rotherham Independent* 1855).

The death of Hannah Rallison was the final straw for the Favell family. Along with the occupants of four neighbouring tenements, they abandoned the haunted tenement and moved to another rented dwelling nearby. On the evening of Tuesday 6 March 1855 a crowd of three hundred people gathered outside the haunted premises on Campo Lane, blocking movement on the road outside. Windows were broken, lead was stolen from the roof and an outhouse demolished. One group, their courage fuelled by drink, broke into the haunted property and began hauling up flagstones from the cellar. Pickpockets joined the melee and after several bystanders were violently robbed a force of six policemen were called for. As they tried to clear the road, the mood grew angry and two were left badly injured in the street battle that followed (*Sheffield & Rotherham Independent* 1855).

Communal ghost hunts such as this were regarded by the Victorian authorities and press as "uncouth and vulgar, a disgraceful mix of 'superstition' and a lack of civility" (Davies 2007: 92). The editors of the *Sheffield Free Press* and *Sheffield & Rotherham Independent,* declared they did not believe in ghosts and did not want to see property damaged and law abiding people robbed or assaulted by those who did. These newspapers were scathing in their criticism of what they called "the Campo Lane delusion" and directed most of their blame upon "credulous Mormonites". On 17 March 1855 *The Sheffield & Rotherham Independent* published what it claimed was a rational explanation for the ghost scare:

"We have been informed that some of the alleged appearances have resulted from the operations with a magic lantern by the occupiers of adjacent premises, who knew that Favell and his family were Mormonites, and determined to have a lark at their experience." (*Sheffield & Rotherham Independent* 1855).

Ghost shows and Phantasmagoria were a familiar attraction at fairs and theatres from the 18th century onwards and this was not the first time the optical effects they produced had been invoked to explain ghost scares [6]. Despite its distaste for popular superstitions the *Sheffield Free Press* was forced to admit "the parties concerned in this affair whom we have seen

solemnly affirm its truth, and as solemnly believe that it is the work of a supernatural agency" (*Sheffield Free Press* 1855). It also reported that John Favell continued to believe a woman had been murdered in the house during an earlier century. He would not be dissuaded when a journalist informed him the rented tenement he had vacated had been constructed two decades earlier.

Henry Pawson, editor of the *Sheffield Times*, the city newspaper that was first to publish the story of the Campo Lane ghost [7], declared that he remained open-minded: "That popular belief in ghosts is not extinct, even in a large town like Sheffield, is proved by [these] tragic circumstances…we leave to the ingenious reader to explain away these appearances – fancied or real –upon rational grounds. We content ourselves with 'telling the tale as 'twas told to us,' satisfied that we have detailed for public delectation a ghost story which is far too good to remain hidden in obscurity." (*Sheffield Times,* 1855).

English Law and Death from Fright

Apart from being called as a witness at the Sheffield inquest, Harriet Ward escaped any legal responsibility for the death of Hannah Rallison. However, the remaining seven examples of "death from fright" collected by my research from the 19th century newspaper archive are examples where responsibility was attributed to persons impersonating ghosts for the purposes of a prank or joke [See Figure 2]. In December 1830 George Gillett was tried for manslaughter at the Old Bailey in London for causing the death of an 81-year-old woman, Mary Steers, from fright. Gillett had wrapped himself in a white sheet and, in an eerie voice, warned he would chop off her head. Steers fell ill and said "I knew I should never get over it – that fright has killed me" before her death. At his trial it could not be proved that the fright she received was the direct cause of her death and Gillett was discharged (*Chester Chronicle* 1831).

In 1857 a Derbyshire man was tried for manslaughter following the death from fright of a 15-year-old boy, Robert Mitchell, in Alfreton. A jury at Derby Assizes heard that Mitchell was in the habit of fetching milk from a farm via a path that had a reputation for being haunted. On 22 December 1856, a servant on the farm, John Percival, decided to play a joke on the teenager by wearing a white sheet, then "took his station by a stile on the footpath by which the deceased would return home." As Mitchell approached he asked "Is that you Jack?". No answer was received but the boy continued to approach the stile until Percival revealed his identity. The jury heard how, on returning home, the victim of the prank looked

"pale and frightened" and told his father he seen a white figure at the stile. The following morning he collapsed and "ultimately died in a state of great exhaustion." Two doctors who gave evidence at the trial said they were "unable to express any clear opinion that the death was the result of the fright." Mitchell was found not guilty and freed, but was warned by the judge "never again to indulge in practical jokes" (*Westmorland Gazette* 1857).

What is undoubtedly the most tragic story in this category concerns the death of a seven-year-old Lancashire girl, Jane Halsall, in December 1887. The girl told her father the children with whom she played had teased her with a story that the Liverpool ghost, "Spring-heeled Jack" was coming to Southport (Clarke 2006). She repeated the statement to her mother, who tried to allay the child's fears by telling her the ghost was "dead and buried." During the night Jane became seriously ill and when a doctor was called he found her unconscious. At the subsequent inquest the coroner, Sam Brighouse, heard how six hours before her death she was heard to say "the ghost is coming." He remarked that "whoever personated this ghost [Spring-heeled Jack] was a mean and despicable fellow and it was a monstrous thing that a man should have the power to strike terror into children and timid people in this way". He added that he hoped the prankster would be caught and "severely punished" if the law could reach him. In this unusual case the jury were unanimous in returning a verdict of "death from fright" (*Lancaster Gazette* 1887).

Despite not guilty verdicts in the cases of Gillett and Percival, in 1874 a legal test case established that both manslaughter and murder might be attributed to fright in English law. The judgement arose from a case whereby a defendant had struck and abused a teenaged girl nursing a baby. The mother's terrified screams caused the infant to turn "black in the face" and suffer repeated convulsions that resulted in its untimely death (Murdie and Bardens 2003: 1). In 1909 it was further held that "…if the proximate cause of an act leading to death is terror caused by another, the latter may be guilty of manslaughter, though he used no violence" (R v Curley 1909, cited by Murdie and Bardens 2003:2). However, in this and later examples, all legal cases arose from cases where persons were harmed whilst fleeing from threats of violence, as opposed to actual death from fright. Murdie and Bardens note that more recently case law has been extended in the context of actual bodily harm to include the deliberation infliction of purely psychological injury and "arguably, it is logical that liability should extend to death resulting from fright or shock, subject to expert medical guidance" (Murdie and Bardens 2003: 2).

Discussion

At present no comprehensive survey of deaths arising from fear, induced in the context of crime or as a reaction to supernatural experiences, has been conducted in the United Kingdom or elsewhere. The studies published by Phillips (2001) and Panesar and Graham (2012) into cardiac death rates among Chinese and Japanese populations have produced some tentative links with calendar periods traditionally regarded as unlucky or potentially hazardous to humans due to the presence of supernatural forces. However, the results of the 2001 study have so far not been replicated and further research is required.

My research has established that, in the British Isles, there is a long and firmly held tradition in folk belief and language that links ghost experiences with untimely death, sometimes from the fear or the effects of fear. This tradition appears to be reflected in contemporary records, in that – on rare occasions – individuals appear to have died as a direct outcome of encounters with what they or their relatives, neighbours or community believed to be a supernatural entity or force. Such experiences do not exist in a vacuum but are shaped by contemporary legends and beliefs current within communities. David Hufford's research into the Old Hag phenomenon in Newfoundland led him to conclude that some elements of supernatural experience exist independently of cultural influences and may, therefore, accurately reported by informants (Hufford 1982). The sensations reported by those who have experienced the Old Hag can be accounted for as sleep paralysis, a relatively common physiological condition. One study found that 21% of their sample of undergraduate students had at least one isolated experience of sleep paralysis (Holt et al 2012: 10-11). Nevertheless, these experiences are interpreted in Newfoundland and elsewhere within the context of pre-existing supernatural traditions and beliefs, for example as a visitation from a malevolent ghost, witch or alien. This is not to imply that traditional explanations are necessarily correct, but more to suggest that the interpretations adopted by those who experience anomalous phenomena are internally logical and valid within the community that shares the folklore.

The actual source or origins of these experiences are difficult to resolve with certainty but may, in cases such as the Campo Lane ghost be traced to the activities of human pranksters or to natural causes. The search for rational explanations for anomalous experiences is itself a by-product of the traditions of disbelief that emerged from the Enlightenment and came to dominate scholarly discourse on the supernatural by the 19th century. One striking manifestation of the schism that emerged between the traditions of disbelief followed by the

establishment and the traditional beliefs of the lower orders of Victorian society is the evidence from coroner's inquests that emerged as a by-product of my research. For example, when a man's body was found on the banks of the River Yealm in the 1870s, an inquest jury, unable to decide upon a cause of death, decided he must have been "struck down by the phantom hunt." The jury of "twelve good men and true" were determined to return a verdict of "death by supernatural agency" but were, after some difficulty, persuaded by the coroner to return one of accidental death (St Leger-Gordon 1965: 28-29).

Notes

Acknowledgements: This paper was presented at the 30th "Perspectives on Contemporary Legend" International Society for Contemporary Legend Research Conference in Gottingen, Germany (5-9 June 2012). I wish to thank Alan Murdie, whose talk on fatal encounters with ghosts at the Fortean Times Unconvention in 2008 provided the initial inspiration for this research. I also wish to thank Carolyn Waudby and Ann Beedham for their encouragement and proof-reading.

1. All Sheffield newspaper accounts of the Campo Lane ghost named the deceased as Hannah *Rollinson*. However a search at Sheffield City Registry Office failed to locate any record under that surname in the registry of births and deaths. A chronological search located a record for Hannah *Rallison*, who died in Sheffield on 26 February 1855 (County of York, 1855, Registry of Deaths col 57). The death was recorded by Henry P. Badger, Deputy Coroner, on 27 March 1855. The incorrect spelling of Rallison may be the result of mistake by the journalist who reported on the inquest proceedings, or it may be an interpretation of the phonetic pronunciation of the surname.

2. The first Mormon missions to Britain arrived in 1840 with the task of recruiting new converts to emigrate and boost the numbers of the church in America. The growing industrial towns and cities of Victorian England yielded many new converts and by 1850 the church had 30,000 members in England compared with 21,000 in North America. I have been unable to establish the number of Mormon converts in Sheffield during the 1850s but one source says "many converts were made" in the city and one of the earliest Meeting Houses was established in 1848 at Woodhouse, three miles from the city centre (BBC Legacies 2004).

3 The origins of modern spiritualism began with the "rappings" heard by the Fox sisters in Hydeville, New York, in 1848 and the movement that grew out of this phenomenon quickly

spread to Great Britain. The first spiritualist newspaper was published in Keighley, Yorkshire, in 1853 and, as with Mormonism, this new religious movement proved especially popular in densely populated industrial conurbations in northern England.

4 From Sidney Addy's notes on traditions and folklore of South Yorkshire and Derbyshire: "If a ghost appears, and you say to it, 'In the name of the Lord, why visitest thou me?' it will tell you what it has come for" (Addy 1895: 138).

5. Sidney Addy's collection: "The Devil is always in our midst at twelve o'clock, the hour of midnight" (Addy 1895: 138).

6. Ghost shows and phantasmagoria were familiar sights at fairs and theatres from the 18th century and this was not the first time the optical effects they produced had been invoked to explain ghost scares. In 1804 a group of soldiers claimed they saw the ghost of a headless woman in St James's Park, London. One was so terrified by the vision that he was hospitalised. *The Times* later explained the "ghost" as "an application of the Phantasmagoria" by two scholars from Westminster School who had set up their equipment in an empty house nearby (Davies 2007: 199-200).

7. During March 1855 a number of national and regional newspapers in England and Wales published versions of the Campo Lane ghost story including the London *Evening Standard Bradford Observer* and *North Wales Chronicle*. All these accounts were copied from the original stories published by *The Sheffield Times* on 3 & 10 March 1855.

References.

Addy, Sidney Oldall. 1895. *Household Tales and other Traditional Remains*. Sheffield and London: D. Nutt.

Barker, John. 1968. *Scared to Death*. London: Frederick Muller.

Baughman, Ernest W. 1966. *Type and Motif Index of the Folktales of England and North America*. Bloomington: Indiana University Folklore Series 20.

Bennett, Gillian.1987. *Traditions of Belief*. London: Penguin.

Bennett, Gillian. 1999. *Alas, Poor Ghost!* Logan: Utah State University Press.

British Library/BrightSolid. The British Newspaper Archive. [Online] Last accessed 24 August 2012 at: http://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk/

Bristol Mercury. 1894. Frightened by a Ghost. 19 January.

Cannon, Walter B. 1942. "Voodoo" Death. *American Anthropologist*. 44(April-June): 169-181.

Chester Chronicle. 1831. Court & Circular. 10 January.

Clarke, David. 2000. *Supernatural Peak District*. London: Robert Hale.

Clarke, David. 2006. Unmasking Spring-heeled Jack: A case study of a 19th century ghost panic. *Contemporary Legend* n.s.9: 28-52.

Davies, Owen. 2007. *The Haunted: A Social History of Ghosts*. Basingstoke: Palgrave.

Doyle, Arthur Conan. 2001 [1903]. *The Hound of the Baskervilles*. London: Penguin.

Elkington, A.R., Steele, P.R., Yun, D.D. 1965. Scared to Death? *British Medical Journal* 2(August): 363-64.

Frayling, Christopher. 2001. Introduction. In *The Hound of the Baskervilles*, by Arthur Conan Doyle, pp vii-xxxv. London: Penguin.

Hanna, Mark and Dodd, Mike. 2012. *McNae's Essential Law for Journalists*. Oxford University Press.

Hill, Susan.1983. *The Woman in Black*. London: Hamish Hamilton.

Hill, Susan. 2012. On Writing The Woman in Black. *The Guardian*, 19 February.

Holt, Nicola J et al. 2012. *Anomalistic Psychology*. London: Palgrave.

Hufford, David J. 1982. *The Terror that Comes in the Night*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.

Lancaster Gazette. 1887. Frightened to Death. 19 November.

Leather, Ella Mary. 1912. *The Folklore of Herefordshire*. London: Sidgwick & Jackson.

London Evening Standard, 1841. A Ghost. 23 March.

BBC Legacies. 2004. Mormon Emigration from Sheffield. [Online] last accessed 9 September 2012. http://www.bbc.co.uk/legacies/immig_emig/england/south_yorkshire/

Murdie, Alan and Bardens, Dennis. 2003. Scared to Death. *New Law Journal* 153 (7093): 1-3.

Panesar, Nirmal and Graham, Colin. 2012. Does the death rate of Hong Kong Chinese change during the lunar ghost month? *Emergency Medicine Journal* 29:319-321.

Phillips, David P, Liu, G.C, Kwok, K, et al. The Hound of the Baskervilles effect: natural experiment on the influence of psychological stress on timing of death. *British Medical Journal* 323: 1443-6.

St Leger-Gordon, Ruth. 1965. *The Witchcraft and Folklore of Dartmoor*. London: Robert Hale.

Samuels, Martin A. 2007. 'Voodoo' death revisited: The modern lessons of neurocardiology. *Cleveland Journal of Medicine* 74(1):S8-16.

Sheffield & Rotherham Independent. 1855. The Story of the Campo Lane Ghost. 17 March.

Sheffield Free Press. 1855. The Ghost. 10 March.

Sheffield Telegraph. 1897. Scared by a Ghost. 26 October.

Sheffield Times. 1855a. Frightened to Death by a Ghost. 3 March

Sheffield Times. 1855b. The Campo Lane Ghost. 10 March.

Simpson, Jacqueline. 1976. *The Folklore of Sussex*. London: Batsford.

Simpson, Jacqueline and Roud, Steve. 2000. *A Dictionary of English Folklore*. Oxford University Press.

Simpson, Jacqueline. Repentant Soul of Walking Corpse? Debatable apparitions in Medieval England. *Folklore* 114: 389-402.

Smith, Gary. *2002. Scared to Death? British* Medical Journal 325: 1442-3.

Sunderland Echo. 1889. Girl Frightened to Death by an Apparition. 20 September.

Westmorland Gazette. 1857. Fatal Practical Joke: A Lad Frightened to Death. 28 March.