

## **HELEN DUNCAN**

David C F Wright PhD

Helen Duncan was born Victoria Catherine Helen MacFarlane on 25 November 1897 in Callandar, Scotland. She was born into a decent working-class family and her mother was a member of the Presbyterian Church.

As a child, Helen terrified her fellow pupils with her 'prophecies' of doom and gloom and her behaviour was hysterical. She suffered from delusions and was professionally considered to be mentally unwell.

In 1916 she married Harry Duncan who was a war veteran who recounted his experiences in the Great War not only as a soldier but regarding the part that the Navy played in the conflict. These stories were impressed on his young wife's mind.

She was now a medium holding seances and charging excessively for her services in order to bring income into the home.

In 1926 she allegedly summoned spirits of the recent dead emitting ectoplasm from her mouth.

She had a part time job in a bleach factory and had six children.

Later, she became a minister of a spiritualist church and one of their rules is that if you receive a revelation from a spirit of awful news or something that could upset anyone, you did not reveal it.

The London Spiritual Alliance investigated both her and her methods in 1931 and the outcome was that she was denounced as a fraud. Harry Price of the National Laboratory of Psychical Research, and others, attended her seances. She was found to be swallowing cheesecloth and regurgitating it claiming it to be ectoplasm. To prove the point she was asked to have a X-ray and made a disgraceful spectacle of herself in the street refusing the X-ray as it would further prove her to be a fraud.

It has to be stressed that all the heads of spiritualists and psychics publicly denounced her as a fraud and embarrassment.

In 1934 one of those attending one of her seances in Edinburgh grabbed at one of Duncan's materialisations. It was not a spirit or ectoplasm but parts of an undervest. The police were called and she was charged with affray and fraud.

During World War II she held a seance in Portsmouth, the home of the Royal Navy, and declared that the HMS Barham had been sunk and that a dead sailor from that ship had appeared before her. Contrary to what some assert, the families of the casualties had already been informed before Duncan's declaration and it may be that Duncan heard this from a bereaved relative. She bragged about this revelation throughout the city and caused distress and demoralisation and was in violation of the war time law and regulations which had been notified to every household in 1939 and posters were on display everywhere. She was also in serious breach of the Spiritualist Church's regulations mentioned earlier.

The Navy took an interest in her and officers attended her seances. They witnessed one of her frauds after she produced a white shrouded figure claiming it to be the spirit of someone recently dead and yet it was her draped in a white garment. She was arrested for fraud.

The incident of the dead sailor from HMS Barham was investigated. She described the sailor and the headband he was wearing which named the ship. Despite what you see in films, since 1939 sailors' headbands did not name the ship and so in December 1941 when the Barham went down the sailor's did not have headbands naming their ship. Duncan was lying. The police searched her house and found an out of issue sailor's cap with the name of the ship on it. How had she acquired this and why? As we have said the relatives had been informed of this tragedy and Duncan may have heard this before her seance and before the news had been published and made widely known.

Senior officers in the Navy have confirmed the headband information.

She was a fraud and a crook. She went to prison for nine months. Other members of the Portsmouth Psychic Centre, who were party to her deceptions, were also charged and found guilty.

While we agree that the Witchcraft Act was out of date in many respects, and even Churchill disapproved of most of it, Duncan could still have eventually been prosecuted under the Fraudulent Mediums Act of 1951.

She was also found guilty many times of fraudulently exploiting the recently bereaved and such offences are utterly deplorable and unforgivable.

On her release from prison, she promised and gave an undertaking to stop conducting seances and was shown leniency. But she broke her promise and was arrested again in 1956 for conducting seances and taking money fraudulently. The arrest was only on the charge of fraud. She was found guilty.

Her family and supporters are still campaigning for her pardon. The campaign to repeal the Witchcraft Act was headed up by a Labour MP, Thomas Brooks, who was... a spiritualist!

Whatever objections are made and whatever defence is promoted Helen Duncan was a fraud and a crook. She was known as the last witch.

She died in Edinburgh on 6 December 1956.

---

COPYRIGHT David C F Wright 2010. No part of this article, however small, may be reproduced or stored in any system whatsoever. It must not be copied, altered or downloaded. Failure to comply is illegal being theft and contrary to International Copyright law and will render any offender liable to action at law.