

**THE EARLY LIFE OF IRISH PSYCHIC AND TRANCE MEDIUM
EILEEN J. GARRETT: FACT OR FABRICATION?**

By Julie Coyle. Independently Published. 2024. 282 pp. £16.00.

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**BEHIND THE MEDIUM'S MASK: EILEEN GARRETT'S
SHADOW SELF**

By Elisabeth J. C. Warwood. New Directions Network Publishing. 2025.

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Eileen J. Garrett (1892–1970) was a well-known Irish trance medium who was noted for her collaborations with prominent psychic researchers such as Arthur Conan Doyle, Harry Price, Andrija Puharich, and J. B. Rhine. Hailed by some as one of the greatest mediums of the 20th century, Garrett founded the New York-based Parapsychology Foundation, organized annual international conferences on parapsychology, and was an extremely successful publisher through her Creative Age Press, which she eventually sold to Farrar, Straus, and Giroux. An author in her own right, Garrett published several books on paranormal topics, including three autobiographies: *My Life as a Search for the Meaning of Mediumship* (1939), *Adventures in the Supernormal: A Personal Memoir* (1949), and *Many Voices: The Autobiography of a Medium* (1968). A posthumous biography by a friend and admirer, Allan Angoff's *Eileen Garrett and the World Beyond the Senses* (1974), further burnished her reputation as a psychic extraordinaire.

Recently, however, two more biographies have appeared, both based on extensive genealogical research, and both challenging rather than championing Garrett's claims about herself. Julie Coyle's *The Early Life of Irish Psychic and Trance Medium Eileen J. Garrett* is a deep dive into the genealogical record that shows that Garrett fabricated many aspects of her early life before she developed her powers as a public medium in the 1930s. Tipped off in part by inconsistencies in Garrett's autobiographies, as well as some earlier genealogical research about her childhood in Ireland, Coyle found that Garrett had prevaricated about such simple facts as her birthday, her name (born Emily Jane Savage, she would use several aliases), her class, her education, her marriages, and even the number of her children. Instead of being orphaned at a young age after the suicide of

her parents and raised in a grand manor house by aristocratic relatives, Garrett was actually born into a working-class family and raised in a tiny cottage by an aunt after her mother's accidental death because her father couldn't care for her (he did not commit suicide). Moreover, she began her working life as a parlour maid, not as the proprietor of London restaurants and hotels as she relates in her autobiographies, nor was she apparently ever legally married, with only one of her three husbands proven to have actually existed.

Elisabeth Warwood's *Behind the Medium's Mask* covers much the same ground, using many of the same materials as Coyle, although Warwood's research manages to uncover even more of Garrett's prevarications, such as her claim to have attended boarding school in Dublin, where she interacted with the Irish literati, which turns out to be chronologically impossible. In the end, both authors agree that Garrett's stories about her childhood and young adulthood are largely fictitious and that her fabulist tendencies continued throughout her life. Of course, this begs the question: does any of this matter when it comes to evaluating Garrett's psychic abilities or her importance to the history of parapsychology? Both authors are emphatic that it does. For Coyle, while acknowledging that Garrett's fabrications may have begun as typical adolescent fantasies and later as social necessity (e.g., to hide the illegitimacy of her daughter), the fact that she repeated them in print was deeply misleading to parapsychologists who searched in her autobiographies for a key to the emergence of her psychic powers (e.g., Roll, 2006). For example, one such investigator reportedly hailed Garrett's first autobiography as ranking in importance with those of Teresa of Ávila, Catherine of Siena, and Emanuel Swedenborg. Warwood concurs with Coyle, but she is even more blunt in her assessment: "While Garrett may have experienced genuine paranormal incidents and encounters that for some reason she subsumed within a fantasized narrative, they may just as likely be as fictitious as the settings in which they are said to have taken place" (p. 212).

Although the two books cover much the same material and come to similar conclusions, there are decided differences between them. Warwood spends more time on Garrett's development as a medium after 1930, making *Behind the Medium's Mask* a more rounded biography and more informative in terms of Garrett's place in the larger history of parapsychology. Moreover, Warwood has a better narrative sense than Coyle, who suffers from the genealogist's reluctance to let any hard-won nugget go unpublished, leading to considerable repetition and dilation over extraneous facts. Nevertheless, given its wealth of documentation and granular detail, Coyle's *The Early Life of Irish Psychic and Trance Medium Eileen J. Garrett* will undoubtedly become an important reference for those who wish to delve even deeper into the life of this important parapsychological figure. For the casual reader, however, the more accessible style of Warwood's *Behind the Medium's Mask* is recommended.

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