Among London's spiritualists during the late 19th century, the undisputed queen had to have been Lizzie Nichol Guppy .

Born Agnes Nichol (although she preferred to be called Lizzie when she became an adult) , she would later claim to have been linked to the spirit world all her life (possibly due to being orphaned as an infant). After seeing her first spirit at the age of nine, Lizzie found herself besieged by ghosts and quickly became known to a widening circle of friends and admirers due to her talent as a physical medium. Along with seeing ghosts, she also became well-known for being able to "apport" physical objects such as fresh flowers and fruit. Her career began in 1866 when she first apported flowers at a séance attended by various spiritualists who gravely testified that her mediumship abilities were real. One of the ones attending, whose reputation as a scientist was unimpeachable, was the great biologist (and scientific heretic) Alfred Russel Wallace .

While Wallace was famous for being a co-discoverer of evolution, his fondness for, ahem, *unconventional* scientific views is not so well-known. Along with being an early opponent of vaccination (and lending considerable scientific legitimacy to the anti-vaccination movement as a result) Alfred Russel Wallace was also an ardent phrenologist and spiritualist. After being introduced to spiritualism in 1865, Wallace began attending séances regularly and this was where he first met Lizzie Nichol. Though Wallace always considered himself to be a skeptical man of science, he was still heavily influenced by his favourite sister, Fanny Sims, who was an enthusiastic spiritualist.

Not that he and his sister were the only ones dabbling in spiritualism at the time. From its strange beginnings with the Fox sisters in the 1840s, the spiritualist movement had gained serious respectability on both sides of the Atlantic by the time Alfred Russel Wallace took an interest. At the height of spiritualism's popularity, the movement claimed more than 10 million supporters with more than one hundred spiritualist societies around the world. Even the French court of Napoleon III was conducting spiritualist séances and public mediums such as Arthur Slade and Lizzie Nichol were the darlings of society wherever they travelled.

For Lizzie Nichol (who became Lizzie Guppy in 1867 when she married her husband Samuel), life was especially good. Not only was her husband a wealthy man, but she and Samuel traveled the Continent astounding people with the séances she conducted. Along with the usual

flowers and fruit materialized on request, Lizzie and Samuel also regaled séance-goers with showers of butterflies, snow, and feathers coming down from the ceiling. When Princess Margaret of Orleans asked for a prickly cactus, Lizzie arranged for twenty of them to fall from the ceiling during one séance in France. Lizzie was also trained as a mesmerist and healer (Mesmerism was all the rage at the time as well) and even established an "apport post" where personal items could be "mailed" from one house to another using her supernatural abilities.

The most notorious episode of Lizzie Guppy's career happened in June of 1871 when Lizzie was supposedly teleported across London unexpectedly after being "summoned" by two of her protégés during a séance. As Lizzie would later claim, she was writing household accounts in her home when she "instantly precipitated from her home" and landed three miles away where she "came down bump in the middle of a séance –dressed only in her underclothes." Eight people reportedly witnessed this episode which the newspapers reported with only a slight grain of salt.

Working with her husband, Lizzie took advantage of the then-new science of photography to create some of the very first "spirit photographs" and they recruited Alfred Russel Wallace to lend his scientific reputation to their authenticity. On March 14, 1874, Wallace went with Lizzie Guppy to a professional photographer's studio where he posed to have a photograph taken. During previous séances with Lizzie, Wallace had received spirit messages from his deceased brother William and had fully expected to see William's ghost in the picture with him. Instead, Wallace was astonished to see a female figure holding flowers in two of the three photographs taken (which he personally watched being prepared and developed). He concluded that the woman looked like his mother (despite the fact that she was still living at the time).

Convinced that the spirit photographs were genuine, Wallace would later write that "I see no escape from the conclusion that some spiritual being, acquainted with my mother's various aspects during life, produced these recognisable impressions on the plate. That she herself still lives and produced these figures may not be proved; but it is a more simple and natural explanation to think that she did so, than to suppose that we are surrounded by beings who carry out an elaborate series of impostures for no other apparent purpose than to dupe us into a belief in a continued existence after death."

As all this was happening, Wallace's son Bertie became severely ill with scarlet fever. Giving up on conventional medicine (which had little to offer at the time, to be fair), Wallace decided to try alternative medicine. And this actually seemed to work for a time. Bertie improved briefly but then suddenly died on April 24, 1874, just before his seventh birthday. Devastated by Bertie's death, Wallace placed all of the blame on conventional medicine and argued that his son might

have lived if he had started the alternative treatment sooner.

While he could never talk about Bertie again (in his later autobiography, he would state that he had two children instead of three), his faith in spiritualism seemed stronger than ever. In that same dark year, Wallace published *A Defence of Modern Spiritualism* in the *Fortnightly Review*. Despite the controversy over spiritualism, Wallace's article would become one of his most republished ever. The article was intended to be a defense against the various attacks on spiritualism by arch-skeptic,
William Benjamin Carpenter.

While Wallace and Carpenter were both fellow scientists (and former friends before the spriritualist movement split them), Carpenter had a very different view of what was happening in the seances that Wallace attended. Not only did Carpenter argue that spiritualism was a fraud, he even went so far as to question the scientific judgement of its supporters, including Wallace and Sir William Crookes . While Wallace's article was intended to prove that spiritualism was real, his article reflected the anger that he felt towards Carpenter and the other skeptics and mainly focused on the idea that men of science could not be fooled. As he would sternly point out in his article:

Now what do our leaders of public opinion say when a scientific man of proved ability again observes a large portion of the more extraordinary phenomena, in his own house, under test conditions, and affirms their objective reality, and this not after a hasty examination, but after four years of research? Men [with heavy scientific appendages to their names] refuse to examine them when invited; the eminent in the society of which he is a fellow refuses to record them; and the press cries out that it wants better witnesses than Mr. Crookes, and that such facts want [confirmation] before they can be believed?

In other words, spirit phenomena were true and needed no further proof. He also linked spiritualism to his other passion for phrenology and argued that spiritualism represented a way of linking all mankind into a universal brotherhood.

Despite this passionate defense, Wallace's article read more like a religious tract than the work of a respected scientist. The article helped alienate Wallace from most of his fellow scientists (especially since it was basically a declaration of war against scientific materialism). Wallace was also notorious for defending mediums such as Lizzie Guppy and Arthur Slade, even after some of them were caught in blatant fraud, by using his scientific reputation to give them added

respectability.

Unfortunately for Wallace, his public defense of spiritualism and his scathing attacks on skeptics damaged his scientific reputation. It also drove a wedge between him and his colleagues, including Charles Darwin, Thomas Huxley, and others, all of whom thought Wallace was far too gullible. Not only was Wallace targeted by arch-skeptics such as William Benjamin Carpenter, he was also strongly criticized in professional journals. The medical journal, the *Lancet*, was especially harsh (largely because of Wallace's anti-vaccination crusade) and Wallace faced similar abuse for the rest of his life. Even when Charles Darwin later tried to get a pension for Wallace (who had lifelong financial problems), many of his fellow-scientists cited Wallace's spiritualism and other anti-science beliefs to resist helping him (they eventually reconsidered, though).

By the time of Wallace's death in 1911, spiritualism had largely lost its appeal and the 1870s represented the peak of the spiritualism craze in most countries. Mediums such as Lizzie Guppy faded into obscurity as more prominent mediums came on the scene and professional debunkers became more successful in catching mediums committing fraud. To his dying day however, Wallace stayed loyal to spiritualism and his scientific reputation was still strong enough to win new converts to the cause.

While Alfred Russel Wallace continues to be remembered as one of the discoverers of the Theory of Evolution, his more unconventional beliefs have been largely overlooked. If nothing else, his strange fascination with spiritualism should serve as a reminder that even supposedly hardheaded scientists can get into trouble when dabbling in areas outside their own expertise.