

A Mind Divided: Arthur Conan Doyle and Spiritualism

By Doug Elliott

The greatest mystery created by Arthur Conan Doyle is not, oddly enough, in a Sherlock Holmes story. Instead, it surrounds the author's conversion to Spiritualism: Why did the man who created the uber-logical master detective fall for a pseudo religion that many observers believe to be a patent mishmash of deception and delusion? Let's plunge in and see what we can uncover.

What is Spiritualism?

Officially, Spiritualism is "The Science, Philosophy and Religion of continuous life, based upon the demonstrated fact of communication, by means of mediumship, with those who live in the Spirit World."¹ Essentially, it is based on the belief that the human personality continues to exist after death and can communicate with the living through séances and other demonstrations.

The basic principles of Spiritualism include a belief in God and a conviction that nature will punish bad behaviour (by making us unhappy) and reward good behaviour (by making us happy.)

Spiritualists believe that a number of physical manifestations demonstrate the reality of survival after death. Many of these are simply different ways that the dead apparently communicate with the living through a medium: by speech, writing or painting, or by tapping-out coded messages (raps). Other spiritualist phenomena include predicting the future, healing by laying on of hands, and transporting, materialising or levitating objects.

The movement grew out of the antics of two sisters, Kate (11) and Margaret (13) Fox, beginning in 1848 at their home in Hydesville, New York. They claimed to be in contact with a «spirit», receiving messages from him by coded rapping noises that had no apparent origin.² The sisters were soon a local sensation, spawning numerous copycats and creating a new movement. Two years later there were reported to be 100 mediums in New York City and in 1897 Spiritualism boasted more than eight million followers in the United States and Europe.³ By this time the phenomenon was more than a series of sideshow performances: it had grown into a full-blown religion with pastors, brick-and-mortar churches and a structured belief system.

Fantasy and faith

Born in 1859 in Edinburgh, Arthur Conan Doyle was raised in a family atmosphere rich in legend, fantasy and imagination. Both of his parents were Anglo-Irish, products of a rich tradition of leprechauns, fairies and other mythical creatures. His grandfather and three uncles were artists. His father, Charles Doyle, possessed a vivid imagination and considerable artistic talent.

Catholicism was also a powerful force in the Doyle family and the young Arthur was steeped in its dogma and rituals. His great aunts were both nuns; his great uncle, James, trained as a priest. At the age of nine, Arthur was sent down to Hodder and Stonyhurst, Jesuit boarding schools in Lancashire, where he was educated for seven years by the priests in a strict Catholic environment.

¹ *Spiritualist Manual Issued by the National Spiritualist Association of Churches of the United States of America* (Many editions from 1911). This definition was adopted by NSAC in 1919.

² In 1889 the Fox sisters confessed that their rappings were all a hoax.

³ Spiritualism peaked in popularity in the first 30 years of the twentieth century before rapidly declining. There are still a number of spiritualist churches in Canada, the USA and the UK, with about 50 congregations in Australia.

Logic and deduction

Counterbalancing Arthur's childhood world of the imagination, fantasy and unquestioned beliefs, the last half of the nineteenth century was a period of extraordinary scientific advance. Milestones in life science, anthropology, archaeology, astronomy and physics seemed to come almost weekly. Darwin published his theory of the evolution of species (1859), Pasteur presented the germ theory of disease (1861), Maxwell explored the nature of magnetism (1864), Mendeleev developed the periodic table of elements (1869) and Roentgen produced x-rays.

Through his schooling and his reading (he was always a voracious reader), Arthur learned of the latest triumphs of science. By the time he reached manhood two powerful, and often conflicting, sets of forces -- of the mind and of the spirit -- would be firmly planted in his consciousness, each demanding primacy.

Rejecting religion

At the age of 18 Arthur enrolled in the University of Edinburgh as a medical student, a field of study in which science, observation and deduction rule over faith and fantasy.

Five years later he renounced the Catholic beliefs that had guided his family's life and, indeed, his own. He declared himself agnostic: still a seeker for the truth, but as yet unconvinced of any spiritual reality. Discarding the pronouncements of the Church or any other authority, he vowed, "Never will I accept anything which cannot be proved to me." Arthur was now his own highest authority. He began to exude that unshakeable self-confidence that would mark his character for the rest of his life.



Arthur Conan Doyle around 1882

But the internal conflict was not completely resolved. Try as he might, he could not completely shed the spiritual values that the Church had offered. He described some of his conflict in the semi-autobiographical novel *The Stark Munro Letters* (1895):

When first I came out of the faith in which I had been reared, I certainly did feel for a time as if my life-belt had burst... I was conscious of a vague unrest, of a constant want of repose, of an emptiness and hardness which I had not noticed in life before. I had so identified religion with the Bible that I could not conceive them apart. When the foundation proved false, the whole structure came rattling about my ears.

Ghosts and Séances

In 1882, at about the same time as he was jettisoning religion, the young doctor moved to the Portsmouth suburb of Southsea to set up his first practice. There he met Maj-Gen Alfred W Drayson, an ex-soldier, mathematician, astronomer, prolific writer and all-round larger-than-life character. Drayson was also a firm believer in Spiritualism, which he urged Arthur to investigate.

At the time Arthur was a solid sceptic on the subject. He was well aware of the many fraudulent mediums and his logical mind was able to examine and discard phenomena that believers found convincing.

Still, he suspected that there may be a grain of truth amongst all the nonsense, and he continued to explore the phenomenon. He read widely on the subject: more than seventy titles are listed in

his personal Southsea notebooks.⁴ He set up an experiment in telepathy with a friend, from which he concluded that he could, in fact, transmit his thoughts without using normal methods. But his experiences with informal séances and table-turning sessions with friends were less than impressive. «I was interested,» he wrote later, «but very sceptical.»

Drayson invited Arthur to his own family séances and encouraging him to continue to investigate Spiritualism. Arthur agreed to continue but he could not afford to pay a «professional» medium, so the séances he attended were strictly amateur affairs with friends.

Finally he was invited to sit with an experienced medium, «an old gentleman who was reputed to have considerable mediumistic power.»⁵ As part of the session, the medium produced a written message for Arthur: “The gentleman is a healer. Tell him from me not to read Leigh Hunt’s book.” This set Arthur aback: he had recently been debating whether to get a copy of Hunt’s *Comic Dramatists of the Restoration*. As he could not recall mentioning this dilemma to anyone, the medium’s knowledge of his own thoughts was particularly puzzling.

The letter to *Light*

The experience prompted Arthur to write a letter to a popular spiritualist weekly, *Light*, about it. He called the session an “incident which, after many months of inquiry, showed me at last that it was absolutely certain that intelligence could exist apart from the body.”⁶

Recounting the Leigh Hunt message, he admitted his amazement: “I can swear that no one knew I had contemplated reading that book, and, moreover, it was no case of thought-reading, for I had never referred to the matter all day. I can only say that if I had had to devise a test message I could not have hit upon one which was so absolutely inexplicable on any hypothesis except that held by Spiritualists.”

By that time he had clearly been exposed to the moral and philosophical framework that Spiritualism had constructed around séance experiences, and he duly repeated it for the readers of *Light*.

Above all, let every inquirer bear in mind that phenomena are only a means to an end, of no value at all of themselves, and simply useful as giving us assurance of an after existence for which we are to prepare by refining away our grosser animal feelings and cultivating our higher, nobler impulses. Unless a man starts with that idea the séance-room sinks to the level of the theatre or the opera — a mere idle resort for the indulgence of a foolish, purposeless curiosity.”

Arthur finished by encouraging others to persist in seeking a positive result from sittings. Patience will be rewarded, he insisted; a personal message will come and, along with it, belief.

It is significant that in this, his first public utterance on the subject, he took pains to emphasise the greater philosophical implications of Spiritualism. Furthermore, his knowledge and acceptance of the standard spiritualist dogma is revealing. Clearly this position did not only come from the unexpected personal message, but also from many hours spent in the company of earnest believers. Arthur Conan Doyle had apparently found a set of beliefs to replace Catholicism.

The Detached Investigator

Notwithstanding this testimony, Spiritualism occupied a very small part of Arthur’s life for the next thirty years. A man of many parts, Arthur packed his life with family, writing, sport, travel, and various

⁴ Miller, Russell: *The Adventures of Arthur Conan Doyle*. London, Pimlico, 2008. p.355

⁵ *Light*, 2 July 1887.

⁶ *Ibid.*

causes such as divorce reform. And yet the psychic world was never far from the surface. Hopeful but still uncommitted, much aware of the potential for fraud, Arthur continued to read widely and attend séances when time allowed.

In 1893 he joined the Society for Psychical Research, which had been founded just the year before, the first organisation dedicated to applying the scientific method to studying the paranormal. Among its founding group of respected scientists were physicist Oliver Lodge and writer FWH Myers, both of whom were believers, although several of the founders were not.⁷ Arthur met Lodge in 1902 and they became friends, corresponding over the years about their favourite subject.

Reflecting his dalliance with the supernatural, many of Arthur's short stories from the period bear occult themes: "John Barrington Cowles" (1884) and "The Parasite" (1894) are about evil hypnotists; in 'Lot 249' (1891) a mummy comes to life; 'The Great Kleinplatz Experiment' (1885) deals with mind transfer; and 'The Brown Hand' (1899) is a ghost story.

The Conversion

In 1916, pumelled by two years of unrelenting war, Conan Doyle came to a full acceptance of Spiritualism and its phenomena. The Great War, which many had predicted would be over by the end of 1914, had proved to be a persistent and efficient killing machine. It was hard to find a family in England who had not been personally touched by loss.

Conan Doyle and his family had already lost three: his wife's brother, his sister's husband, and his nephew. And in January 1916 Lily Loder-Symonds, a long-time friend of Arthur and Jean and a strong spiritualist, died of influenza.

As he would say years later, "it was only in the time of the war, when all these splendid young fellows were disappearing from our view,... that I realised the overpowering importance to the human race of knowing more about this matter."⁸

In April of that year he wrote again to *Light* setting out his conviction:

"The instances are so numerous, so well attested ... that one marvels that any man calling himself a scientist could dismiss them as unworthy of scientific consideration."⁹

And in November, another letter went even further: "Spiritualism is taking shape as the foundations of a definite system of religious thought..."¹⁰

It was not enough for him to believe that people survived after death and could communicate with the living. He needed to understand the religious implications of it all.

An article in *Light*,¹¹ 'The New Revelation,' laid out his beliefs. The weight of evidence, he wrote, gives proof positive that the phenomena are real. Further credibility is provided by the endorsements of intellectuals such as Oliver Lodge. We should now focus less on the reality of psychic messages and more on their content. The messages are consistent with existing religious ideas: there is an afterlife, a heaven, angels and communication with the dead. They also confirm that we pay a price for immoral

⁷ The non-profit SPR still exists, headquartered in London. See <https://www.spr.ac.uk/>

⁸ Fox newsreel interview, 1927. Available online at: [/archive.org/download/SirArthurConanDoyleSpeaks_272/SirArthurConanDoyle_512kb.mp4](http://archive.org/download/SirArthurConanDoyleSpeaks_272/SirArthurConanDoyle_512kb.mp4)

⁹ *Light*, 13 May 1916

¹⁰ *Light*, 4 November 1916

¹¹ *Ibid.*

acts. He called this new revelation “the greatest religious event since the death of Christ.”

Though the readership of *Light* was limited, Arthur’s name made the essay big news: it was reprinted in full in the November 26 issue of the *New York Times*.¹²

The crusade

He had now committed his new beliefs to print. The next step was to present them in an open forum. He decided to test out his lecture on 7 October 1917 in the Yorkshire city of Bradford at the Eastbrook Wesleyan Mission. His presentation was innocuously titled ‘Influence of Spiritualism on Religion’ but the content, as reported briefly in the *Hull Daily Mail* the next day, was powerful: I used to be a materialist but after an intense study over many years, and in the face of the carnage of war, I now believe that Spiritualism is real. Furthermore, the greater implications of these psychic messages require that we re-assess religion as a matter of fact, not faith.

Predictably, his lecture generated few ripples. It was his second lecture on 25 October, now openly called ‘The New Revelation’, that would be his true baptism as a spokesman on the subject, his “big Spiritual meeting”¹³ as he called it. “So far as I know it is the first attempt to show what the real meaning is of the modern spiritual movement.”

The lecture was hosted by the London Spiritualist Alliance and Sir Oliver Lodge presided over the meeting. (“I shall have a picked audience if the night is decently immune from raids.”¹⁴) The event made its mark: *The Times* reported on it the following morning.¹⁵ He told his mother that he “had a really wonderful audience, who seemed sympathetic.” His article ‘Phenomena and Religion of Spiritualism: A New Revelation’ was published in *The Times* a few days later.¹⁶

An expanded message, *The New Revelation*, was published in instalments in *Light* in November 1917, and in book form on 29 April the following year. It was only 20,000 words -- 170 small pages with big text and generous margins -- but it said what he needed to say. His goal was to connect the physical and religious aspects of Spiritualism, something which he felt was so far lacking. He claimed that Spiritualism was consistent with and supportive of all other religions, but he listed a number of adjustments to Christianity that would be necessary. The book comes across as rambling and, at times, defensive: in other words, a good snapshot of Arthur’s state of mind at the time.

Other lectures followed as he criss-crossed the provincial towns: perhaps a dozen in 1918; at least 25 in 1919; and so on into the middle of 1920 when the family sailed to Australia in response to an invitation from the spiritualists there. He took the message to America (1922 & 1923) and Southern Africa (1928) as well as to almost every town in the U.K. He became known as “the St Paul of Spiritualism”. According to John Dickson Carr, by “the end of 1923 he had traversed 50,000 miles and addressed nearly a quarter of a million people.”¹⁷

He also kept writing Spiritualist tracts, altogether nine books on the subject.

Ever controversial

¹² Facsimile available on the Arthur Conan Doyle Encyclopedia (<https://www.arthur-conan-doyle.com/>)

¹³ Lellenberg, Jon, Daniel Stashower & Charles Foley (eds.): *Arthur Conan Doyle, A Life in Letters*. New York, Penguin Press, 2007. p.632

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ *The Times* 26 October 1917, p.3

¹⁶ *The Times* October 28 1917, p.5

¹⁷ Carr, John Dickson: *The Life of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle*: London, John Murray, 1949.

There was, of course, opposition to his message. Many thought he'd take leave of his senses or that he was driven by diabolic forces: "Chief Devil, Spiritualist Church", was how one letter -- from a clergyman, no less -- was addressed to him.



Frances (1917), above, and Elsie (1920), below, with fairies



In his great enthusiasm, he could stumble into trouble. Perhaps the most dangerous blow to his reputation was the business of the fairies in the garden.

In 1917, two cousins Elsie Wright (16) & Frances Griffiths (9) came forward with five photographs that they insisted were of fairies. Persuaded by photographic experts who found no evidence of tampering, and convinced that the young girls were incapable of fakery, Arthur wrote glowingly about the story in an article for *The Strand* (December 1920) and a book, *The Coming of the Fairies* (1922). In 1983 the girls admitted they had cut out pictures from magazines and propped them up with hat pins.

The Certainty

Unlike the rest of us who are typically plagued by doubt on important matters, Arthur Conan Doyle never expressed the smallest hesitation as regards Spiritualism after 1916:

When I talk on this subject, I'm not talking about what I believe, I'm not talking about what I think, I'm talking about what I know. There's an enormous difference, believe me, between believing a thing and knowing a thing.¹⁸

He was fond of quoting his 1887 letter to *Light* as evidence of his long-standing expertise. One might fault his logic but not his resolve.

And so he continued for the last dozen years of his life, travelling widely and driving himself in a relentless series of lectures, debates, letters and interviews. His opponents routinely countered that the phenomena could not be genuine, given the number of fraudulent and deluded mediums. He shot back that surely *some* of the evidence must be real and besides, it's the religious aspect that is important, not the occasional error.

He spent much of his financial reserves on the cause and his physical reserves as well, leading to a cardiac breakdown in early 1930 that confined him to his bed for ten weeks and eventually to his death at age 71 later that year.

The Divided Man

How do we reconcile the two halves of ACD's character? On the one hand, here is a logical mind, trained as a doctor, up to date with the latest scientific advances, the man who abandoned his Catholic upbringing with the declaration "Never will I accept anything which cannot be proved to me." The man who created Sherlock Holmes.

On the other hand was the man who believed unreservedly in séance-room phenomena that today we find laughable, who thought fairies were real and who staunchly supported mediums declared fraudulent by other investigators.

¹⁸ Fox newsreel interview, 1927.

I think the answer lies in his declaration, «The objective side of it ceased to interest... The religious side of it was clearly of infinitely greater importance.» For the objective side was indeed simply parlour tricks: some were real, he believed, and some were fake. But it was the religious side that he had been searching for his whole life. Until he had taken in all of the messages from hundreds of séances -- attended and read about -- and examined the religion and ethos around it, the whole thing was unimportant. But after he'd rationalised the religious implications, nothing else was important.

Replacing Catholicism as one's spiritual foundation is no small feat. Building on the scriptures, the Church has had two thousand years of thinkers, committees, edicts, bulls, encyclicals to create a rich religious, moral and philosophical infrastructure, to be able to answer every conceivable question about faith and the nature of God. Conan Doyle only had a few hundred books and personal séances to satisfy himself that the religious framework of Spiritualism was complete and consistent. Even if he discarded half of what he heard, it was a massive task. At the same time, his religious upbringing was too engrained in him to be discarded completely, and he found ways to make it consistent with Spiritualism. This was not too difficult, as most mediums were Christian and wove their beliefs into the messages they delivered.

Why did it take him from 1882 to 1916 to raise his hand fully? Certainly the nature of mediumship hadn't changed: the same charlatans were playing the same tricks and the same «logical» justifications of séance-room phenomena were still offered by the believers. The tragedy of war made the search more urgent but did not provide the answer.

I think Arthur took this time, in the true Sherlockian manner, to gather data, carefully selecting philosophical details and weaving them into his religious world-view.

By the time he «came out» in 1916, he had answers for everything: the nature of heaven; the stages of the end-of-life journey, the moral lessons, Spiritualism's relationship to Christianity. In his formidable mind it was all very logical. Once he had determined that, there was no persuading him otherwise.

Further reading

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