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A note on the origin of modern spiritualism.

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A Note on the Origin of 'Modern' Spiritualism
by *Anthony A. Walsh*

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Notes and Events

A Note on the Origin of 'Modern' Spiritualism

The origin of 'modern' spiritualism is typically dated from a series of events which occurred in Hydesville, New York, involving two sisters, the Fox girls, in 1848.¹ As the story goes, their mother's attention was drawn one evening to a series of 'rappings' or 'knockings' which seemed to emanate from the feet of one of the girls. Believing that the daughter had made the noises herself Mrs. Fox requested that she cease; however, the daughter solemnly assured her that she had not made the sounds. It was next observed that the 'raps' seemed to respond to questions put by Mrs. Fox. Questions would be asked and a specific number of 'raps' requested in reply, and, as we are told, the correct number of 'raps' would always appear. It was assumed by the Foxes that some 'intelligent person'—perhaps from the spirit world—was doing the 'knocking.' The village of Hydesville was soon in a commotion and divided into two camps. One camp believed that the 'rappings' emanated from supernatural beings while the other camp believed them to be a trick. Shortly thereafter, one of the girls visited a third sister, Mrs. Fish of Rochester, New York, and it was said that the 'rappings' followed her, made their appearance, and even began to emanate from Mrs. Fish. The accounts of the strange events soon appeared throughout the country in the press and were discussed at length as the 'Rochester Rappings.'² Following these events, a virtual epidemic occurred. According to Jastrow,³ 'Within a short period the news . . . had called into existence thousands of spirit circles; had developed wonderful "mediums" . . . [and] had amassed a vast store of strange testimony.'

At least one author, J. Stanley Grimes, a contemporary of the Fox sisters, traces the origins of spiritualism to another source.⁴ Grimes, who was a phrenol-

1. E. G. Boring, *A history of experimental psychology*, 2nd ed. (New York, 1950), p. 122; W. B. Carpenter, *Mesmerism, spiritualism, &c. historically & scientifically considered: Being two lectures delivered at the London Institution* (London, 1877), pp. 100ff.; J. Jastrow, *Fact and fable in psychology* (Boston, 1900), p. 137; and M. E. Sidgwick, 'Spiritualism,' in *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 11th ed. (Cambridge, England, 1911), 25, 705-708.

2. J. S. Grimes, *The mysteries of human nature explained by a new system of nervous physiology: to which is added, a review of the errors of spiritualism, and instructions for developing or resisting the influence by which subjects and mediums are made* (Buffalo, 1857), pp. 362-363.

3. Jastrow (n. 1), p. 137.

4. Grimes (n. 2), pp. 346ff.

ogist and a student of mesmerism, was considered something of a radical in his day. In his *New System of Phrenology*,⁵ for example, he presented a phrenological system which was completely different from the one then in vogue.⁶ Furthermore, he invoked the chagrin of some of his contemporaries when in 1845 he published a work disclaiming the popular notion that 'Animal Magnetism' could successfully be combined with phrenology into new systems known variously as 'Phreno-Magnetism,' 'Pathetism,' 'Electro-Biology,' or 'Electro-Psychology' depending on which theorist one read.⁷ In his attempts at synthesis, he coined the term *Etherology* to encompass all the aforementioned terms and to explain the phenomena associated with mesmerism.⁸ Grimes's account of the errors of spiritualism, its relationship to mesmerism, and his account of the origins of the spiritualism movement were discussed in a later work.⁹

According to Grimes, 'modern spiritualism originated at . . . [his] lectures in Poughkeepsic, N.Y. in 1843.'¹⁰ These lectures were on the topics of the physiology of the nervous system and phrenology, and during them Grimes illustrated his points with demonstrations and experiments in mesmerism. At this time he was exploring what he called 'credence induction,' or 'self-induction,' a phenomenon akin to what today would be called autosuggestion. Considering that during this period it was generally believed that some 'fluid,' a form of 'Animal Magnetism,' flowed from the fingers of the mesmerist into his subject, and that the mesmerist by means of his will and his hands could control the mind and the body of his subject, Grimes's insight was quite advanced. He went contrary to the prevailing opinion in denying the existence of a fluid and concluded that ' . . . the principal, if not the only, active agent, in almost all cases [where mesmeric manifestations are exhibited], is the language of the operator [i.e., the suggestions of the mesmerist were sufficient to induce a trance]. . . .'¹¹ During the course of these lectures, Grimes experimented with a group of twenty volunteers from his audience, bringing them to the stage and having them hold a cord while he made the suggestion that they would be mesmerized through it. He stated that he had difficulty keeping his audience from laughing but that shortly thereafter all the volunteers, in varying degrees, began to act out the directives. He found further that contrary to popular belief he could not 'will' his subjects to do anything but that they would follow any verbal command he gave. Although Grimes was not a believer in clairvoyance, two of his subjects seemed to

5. J. S. Grimes, *New system of phrenology* (1839) cited in J. S. Grimes, *Compend of the phreno-philosophy of human nature* (Boston, 1850), p. 16.

6. *Ibid.*

7. *Ibid.*, pp. 11ff., and J. S. Grimes, *Etherology, and the phreno-philosophy of mesmerism and magic eloquence: including a new philosophy of sleep and of consciousness, with a review of the pretensions of phrenology, electro-biology, &c.*, W. G. Le Duc, ed. (Boston, 1850), pp. 12-13.

8. *Ibid.*

9. Grimes (n. 2).

10. *Ibid.*, p. 346.

11. *Ibid.*, p. 348.

exhibit behavior which suggested that they had this power. Andrew Jackson Davis was one of the two so endowed.¹²

Davis became enthusiastic about his new-found gift and subsequently became involved with another man from Poughkeepsie, William Levingston, who had also attended the lectures. In Levingston's shop, with Levingston acting as the mesmerist, Davis's new powers were tested. According to reports, on the first trial Davis declared that he could see through the back of his head, and Levingston claimed that he read a newspaper in this manner.¹³ 'Hundreds flocked to *Levingston's* store, to test the wonderful powers of the clairvoyant, and *Levingston* soon learned to make medical prescriptions, and to charge a fee for each.'¹⁴ Grimes openly criticized the clairvoyant practice of medicine, considering it to be 'a miserable species of quackery.'¹⁵ Summing up his sentiments he stated that of course, there could be no sympathy between the clairvoyant practitioners and myself, after a public declaration of such sentiments; and, though my lectures in Poughkeepsie gave birth to modern spiritualism, and first caused *A. J. Davis* to come into notice, I distinctly protested at the time, and always since, against the principles and the practices which grew thus illegitimately out of my labors, and finally resulted in producing a motley brood of pretended spirit mediums.¹⁶

The history and the progress of the spiritualism movement during the nineteenth century has been recorded in the publications of the period¹⁷ and also in more modern sources.¹⁸ A discussion of all this would be beyond the scope of this note, but a brief review of Davis's career will be of interest. When the clairvoyant practice grew dull in Poughkeepsie, Davis and Levingston commenced a tour through Connecticut 'curing' diseases wherever they went. Traveling with one Reverend Mr. Smith, a Universalist clergyman from Poughkeepsie, they were introduced to the Reverend S. B. Britain, another Universalist clergyman, in Bridgeport, Connecticut. Residing with the Reverend Britain was his brother-in-law Dr. Lyon, a 'botanic physician,' who took a more than casual interest in Davis. Eventually, through a series of dubious circumstances, Levingston was ousted as mesmerist and Dr. Lyon took over. Grimes tells us that

12. *Ibid.*, pp. 346ff.

13. *Ibid.*, pp. 350ff.

14. *Ibid.*, p. 351.

15. *Ibid.*

16. *Ibid.*, pp. 351-352.

17. Carpenter (n. 1); J. B. Dods, *Spirit manifestations examined and explained. Judge Edmonds refuted; or, an exposition of the involuntary powers and instincts* (New York, 1854); and R. Hare, *Experimental investigation of the spirit manifestations, demonstrating the existence of spirits and their communion with mortals. Doctrine of the spirit world respecting heaven, hell, morality and God. Also, the influence of scripture on the morals of Christians* (New York, 1855).

18. H. J. Eysenck, *Sense and nonsense in psychology* (Baltimore, 1966); Jastrow (n. 1); and Sidgwick (n. 1). W. R. Cross, *The burned over district: the social and intellectual history of enthusiastic religion in western New York, 1800-1850* (New York 1965) discusses both Davis and the Fox girls. E. W. Fornell, *The unhappy medium: spiritualism and the life of Margaret Fox* (Austin, 1964) gives the best contemporary account of the Fox family involvement.

when Davis became the subject of *Dr. Lyon*, he, for the first time, learned, that he was specially inspired by spiritual beings for a great work; that he was a prophet and a seer; that his soul could leave his body, and go into the spirit world, and get information of any description which he desired, and return again to earth, enter his body, and make use of his corporeal organs of speech, to impart the knowledge, thus obtained, to his fellow mortals.¹⁹

Grimes always believed that Davis was a dupe, and he noted that Davis was 'notoriously ignorant and illiterate.'²⁰ However, Davis, supported by Messrs. Lyon and Britain, became the most prominent 'seer' of the period.²¹ With still another Universalist clergyman, the Reverend W. Fishbough, acting as scribe, he produced no less than thirty books during his career, the most famous of which was the first, entitled *The Principles of Nature, Her Divine Revelations* (New York, 1847),²² a book which was alleged to have been completely written during the clairvoyant trance. Grimes was of the opinion, however, that Davis had been programmed, so to speak, and during his recording sessions (in the presence of 'reliable' witnesses) would simply restate what his overseers had suggested he state during training (where witnesses were not allowed)—a form of posthypnotic suggestion.²³ The publication of *The Principles of Nature* did not evoke immediate excitement nor did the book realize the profit its author(s) had anticipated, and '... the newly fledged spiritualism was fast sinking from public notice, when a new wonder came to the rescue, and lent it additional claims to attention [the Fox girls and the 'Rochester Rappings']'.²⁴ In sum, we are informed by Grimes that

Davis was the first of the series of modern mediums. At the time of his advent, there were not speaking, rapping, [table] tipping, nor writing mediums. He stood alone, between heaven and earth, the single connecting link of mortal humanity with the world of spirits. He occupied a high position, to which he had been raised from obscurity, not by his talents nor his virtues, but by spiritual election! He had neither wit, nor words, nor worth, natural nor acquired preeminence, nor did he need such helps; greatness had been 'thrust upon him,' without his choice, and without the necessity of any achievement, on his part, except a masterly passiveness of mind, which enabled the spirits to nestle in his brain and hatch a brood of wonders.²⁵

19. Grimes (n. 2), p. 353.

20. *Ibid.*, p. 354.

21. Sidgwick (n. 1), p. 705, and 'Andrew Jackson Davis,' in *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 11th ed. (Cambridge, England, 1911), 7, 865-866.

22. I have seen only the second edition, viz., A. J. Davis, *The principles of nature, her divine revelations, and a voice to mankind by and through Andrew Jackson Davis, the 'Poughkeepsie seer' and 'clairvoyant'* (New York, 1863). Davis also prepared an autobiography, *The magic staff: An autobiography of Andrew Jackson Davis* (New York, 1857).

23. Grimes (n. 2), pp. 356ff.

24. *Ibid.*, p. 361.

25. *Ibid.*, pp. 361-362.

Although Boring²⁶ believed that there was a similarity between the seances of Mesmer and the spiritualistic sittings, he still dated spiritualism from the Fox sisters. Other authors agree.²⁷ Grimes's view concerning the origin of the spiritualistic movement is important since it more *directly* links spiritualism with mesmerism in the nineteenth century. Although the Fox girls are usually given the dubious honor of having originated the movement, it is more appropriately conferred on Grimes and Andrew Jackson Davis.²⁸

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ADDENDUM

Since this brief note was originally prepared, two popular works which deal in part with the origins of 'modern' spiritualism have been published, viz., H. G. Jackson, Jr., *The spirit rappers* (Garden City, New York, 1972) and G. McHargue, *Facts, frauds, and phantasms: A survey of the spiritualist movement* (Garden City, New York, 1972). Although McHargue devotes a complete chapter to A. J. Davis, both she and Jackson adhere to the popularly accepted 1848 date for the 'birth of spiritualism.' These publications are reviewed by this writer, *J. Hist. Behav. Sci.*, proper issue not yet received C.U.L. 19 February 1973, in press.

26. Boring (n. 1), pp. 122f.

27. Carpenter (n. 1); Jastrow (n. 1); and Sidgwick (n. 1).

28. Mesmerism and spiritualism came together prior to Grimes and Davis. See R. Darnton's recent account, *Mesmerism and the end of the Enlightenment in France* (Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1968), *passim*; however, it is from Grimes and Davis that what came to be known as 'modern spiritualism' is most appropriately dated.