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And the showmen cried, "Spirit!": Harry Houdini and Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's search for the truth behind modern Spiritualism

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And the Showmen Cried, “Spirit!”: Harry Houdini and Sir Arthur Conan Doyle’s Search
for the Truth Behind Modern Spiritualism

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A thesis submitted to the Graduate Faculty of

JAMES MADISON UNIVERSITY

In

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Dedication

For my friend and pastor, Timothy Webster, and in loving memory of his wife, Lara.

Thank you for your love and encouragement.

Acknowledgements

My acknowledgements are few but sincere. First, I would like to extend my heartfelt appreciation to my thesis director, Dr. Raymond Hyser for his continued patience, guidance, and editing through the writing process. Also, many thanks to my two other committee members, Dr. Steven Guerrier and Dr. Kristen McCleary for their helpful suggestions in the final edit. Thank you to the other faculty members at James Madison University who encouraged me to delve deeper into the mysteries of Spiritualism.

I also sincerely thank, Patrice Keene, the Executive Director at the American Society for Psychical Research, and Mr. Jeff Twine, librarian at ASPR, for assisting me and for allowing me to explore the research library.

I owe a particular debt of gratitude to Mr. Tom Boldt of Appleton, Wisconsin, for sending me hundreds of invaluable letters and documents from his private Houdini collection.

Lastly, I praise God for His constant mercy and for giving me the ability to make it this far. I would like to offer my deepest thanks to my husband, John, my parents, and countless friends and family members for encouraging me to keep going even when there didn't seem to be another trick up my sleeve.

Preface

“I am a trumpet medium,” Mrs. Cecil Cook began, “Through the power given to me by the Lord, I am able to converse with dead spirits who manifest themselves through these trumpets,” she motioned to a small table with two trumpets on it. The lights were turned off and the séance commenced. The medium called to the spirits to answer any questions the sitters had been contemplating, when a visitor spoke up.¹ “I’ve had a problem with my throat. What should I do?” asked an older woman in the corner. “Why, you have tuberculosis,” a spirit chimed in. Just as the spirit finished his remark another spirit voice whispered in the darkness. “Dad, you have had a very, very hard time but it is all over,” assured the voice, “and I will take care of you and brighten up everything for you and make things comfortable.” A crippled old man straightened in his chair when he heard the familiar voice. “Is that Alfred, my son?” the man asked. As Alfred began to answer through the medium’s trumpet, the old man jumped from his chair and pointed an electric flashlight at the medium’s face. Mrs. Cook froze with the trumpet held up to her lips. “You have the trumpet in your mouth,” the old man cried, “I thought the spirits were speaking!” Mrs. Cook threw down the trumpet and fell to the floor. “You killed the medium!” one of the participants cried. “I’m killed! I’m killed!” Mrs. Cook shouted as she rolled on the floor. One of Mrs. Cook’s confederates jumped for the old man, but he threw down his cane, ripped off his white wig, and took off his glasses.² “I am Houdini!” the man exclaimed. Just as Houdini sprang out of the way another man got up from the table. “I am Detective Joseph Green and this is Policewoman Elizabeth Michaels,” the

¹ Séance participants were usually referred to as “sitters” because they sat around a table holding hands while the medium connected with the spirit world.

² People who worked secretly for a medium were called confederates because they assisted the seer with materials used for producing physical manifestations.

man said pointing to the older woman who spoke earlier. “Nobody move!” he boomed, as all hell broke loose. “You rascal,” cried Mrs. Cook as she struggled to avoid the detective to get to Houdini. The magician hurriedly exited the room and left the police to take care of the fraud. Mrs. Cook was taken to the police station where she was charged with obtaining money under false pretenses.³

Many mediums, like the one mentioned, used various techniques and tools, like musical trumpets, to signal the arrival of a spiritual essence in a séance. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Modern Spiritualism was a mysterious practice and religion that generated a considerable following, but great debate among scholars and laymen.

Historiography

Many historians have considered the role of Modern Spiritualism in America, but they have only done so by investigating Spiritualism’s rise and decline, many focusing on the nineteenth century. Most studies on Spiritualism in Britain and the United States describe Spiritualism as a popular and important religious experiment that lasted less than seventy-five years. R. Lawrence Moore, Ruth Brandon, Janet Oppenheim, and Anne Braude have completed some of the most thorough studies related to the public’s embrace of the practice and religion.⁴ Moore, Brandon, and Oppenheim concentrate on medium interaction, scientific experiments, and Christian clergymen’s campaign against Spiritualism to determine public opinion. Braude’s work suggests that society, namely

³ A copy of the dialog can be found in the Cecil Cook hearing filing at the American Society of Psychical Research, New York City, New York.

⁴ R. Lawrence Moore, *In Search of White Crows: Spiritualism, Parapsychology, and American Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), Ruth Brandon, *The Spiritualists: The Passion for the Occult in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Century* (New York: Knopf, 1983), Janet Oppenheim, *The Other World: Spiritualism and Psychical Research in England, 1850-1914* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1985), Anne Braude, *Radical Spirits: Spiritualism and Women’s Rights in Nineteenth-Century America* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1989).

women, accepted Spiritualism because it offered them a place in church hierarchy and the motivation to pursue equal rights. Although all of these studies provide concrete evidence of public awareness and the appeal of Spiritualism, the broad overviews do not delve into many specific case studies or give enough information regarding public opinion from 1922 to 1924.

Over the past few decades, biographers of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle and Harry Houdini have provided further insight into the lives of the two showmen. Delving into letters, diaries, newspapers, and books, writers have captured new angles while investigating the previously printed materials. Two of the most conclusive biographies of Houdini are Kenneth Silverman's *Houdini!!!: The Career of Erich Weiss* and William Kalush and Larry Sloman's *The Secret Life of Houdini: The Making of America's First Superhero*. Both biographies focus on Houdini's public life as a performer and entertainer, but most importantly, the authors reveal Houdini's private life to be just as amusing and mysterious. Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's biographers also recount the author's life as consistently eventful and constant in the view of the public. Kelvin Jones's *Conan Doyle and the Spirits: The Spiritualist Career of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle* and Russell Miller's *The Adventures of Arthur Conan Doyle* examine Sir Arthur's long life of fighting for public causes, saving lives on the battlefield and in the operating room, writing mystery novels, and becoming a missionary for Spiritualism.⁵

⁵ Kenneth Silverman, *Houdini!!!: The Career of Erich Weiss* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1996), William Kalush and Larry Sloman, *The Secret Life of Houdini: The Making of America's First Superhero* (New York: Atria Books, 2006), Kelvin I. Jones, *Conan Doyle and the Spirits: The Spiritualist Career of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle* (Wellingborough, Northhamptonshire, England: Aquarian Press, 1989), Russell Miller, *The Adventures of Arthur Conan Doyle* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2008).

As interest in Spiritualism spreads, these two prominent figures, American Harry Houdini and British Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, attract significant attention with their lecture tours in the United States in the 1920s in order to inform the American public of Modern Spiritualism. Chapter one is devoted to the history of Modern Spiritualism and the varying debates that arose to challenge and support it.

Chapter two focuses on how both Houdini and Conan Doyle exhibited their own ideas of showmanship during their careers. Houdini was a showman because of the nature of his work as a Vaudeville escape artist who had a masterful understanding of what mystified the public mind. Conan Doyle, although was not a Vaudeville performer, strove to keep audiences attentive as he did in writing novels. The American public would see these two men as rivals, sometimes friends, but most of all, they would be remembered as entertainers.

The purpose of examining these lecture tours is to determine the reaction and opinion of American society toward Modern Spiritualism. The lecture tours are an example of society's fascination with the practices and religion, whether positive or negative. Harry Houdini and Sir Arthur Conan Doyle represented opposing views and causes, and both men made it their mission to either support or refute Spiritualism. Each man characterized a judgment that many laymen, scholars, scientists, and clergymen questioned. Not all people fell on one side of the argument or the other, but most people had an interest in the debate. Press coverage, challenges, and organized support provided some foundation for each of the tours. Although their motivations were dissimilar, Houdini and Conan Doyle went on tour to convey their own idea of truth to the American public. Magazines and newspapers covered most lectures in almost every city visited, and

audience members challenged the two men both on stage and off to explain the phenomena behind Spiritualism.

During the lectures, Houdini and Conan Doyle portrayed their own version of Spiritualism through an art of showmanship. The lectures provided an ideal setting for Houdini to demonstrate his mastery of illusions, and for Conan Doyle to reveal his elegant and persuasive form of writing. Crowds assembled outside packed theatre halls and sold-out venues to witness and hear the words of the two famous men. Not everyone who attended admitted skepticism or belief, but most people confessed a sense of curiosity. Hence, it was entertainment for them. While the tours were attracting audiences, the overwhelming estimation was neither for nor against Modern Spiritualism, it was a cultural phenomenon that stimulated public interest. Audience reaction and the general attitude seen in the press was one that changed over time with altering outlooks from the speeches and spokesmen. The lecture tours and speakers symbolized the growing attention and varying reactions to Spiritualism.

The largest proponent of the lecture tours was the press, not as an advocate or opponent of either cause, but as a supporter of publicity and public interest. The lecture tours spanned across the United States and both Houdini and Conan Doyle visited major cities and prominent locations to speak. Newspapers usually printed a notice when the speakers were coming and gave updates on the lectures that were already given. The press as well as audiences clamored for the famous men because of their previous work. Houdini's lecture tours were generally given while he was either on tour for a Vaudeville manager, or performing his own stunts as a freelance illusionist. Reporters and patrons enjoyed Houdini's lectures because he demonstrated the various stunts and tricks used by

mediums, which added a flare of entertainment. Conan Doyle's two American tours only lasted a combined eighty days and he spent the majority of the time showing spirit photographs and attending séances.

Both speakers had an advantage while on tour; they were already popular figures before the tours began. Houdini had spent over twenty-five years as an illusionist performing all over the world leaving his face and pictures of his stunts in newspapers, theatre programs, and posters. He was known for his death-defying stunts and as one of the most successful entertainers of his era. Conan Doyle made headlines for his writing career as the author of the popular mystery series, Sherlock Holmes. Although the tours attracted audiences because of the topic, people also attended to see the celebrities. Newspapers printed articles about Houdini's magic and Conan Doyle's novels to appeal to more people, but the press was also interested in the challenges. Though spectators were drawn to fame, the numerous tests presented to the lecturers suggested that audiences also gathered to question and determine the legitimacy of Spiritualism.

Many of the challenges presented to Houdini and Conan Doyle were published in newspapers and answered during lectures to test the presenter's knowledge and to establish a more definitive answer. Houdini and Conan Doyle researched religious, scientific, and psychical arguments that were popular in order to provide their own opinion and possible alterations to the claims. Each question posed was generally answered during the lecture or it was answered in the form of a letter to the editor from the speaker. If the question was important enough to the presenter, it was generally included in the next lecture to clarify any misgivings or misinterpretations. Houdini and Conan Doyle also challenged mediums and scholars to produce phenomena and

experiments that were justifiable. The illusionist and writer also tested each other to generate valid proof that was not fabricated in any way.

Press coverage was evident all over the United States and reaffirmed the continued concentration on spiritual activity. The lectures were both entertaining and informative and reporters embraced the seminars not only for the positive and negative reactions, but also for the sustained readership. From the beginning of movement, Spiritualism newspapers and magazines embraced Spiritualism because the practice and religion was spreading rapidly and people were showing interest in the phenomena exhibited at séances. The lecture tours provided further publicity for Houdini and Conan Doyle, but also for the newspapers. Newspapers covered both positive and negative reactions to the tours and most attempted to be objective for the sake of the lecturers and the public.

To determine the importance of the lecture tours and the attitude regarding Modern Spiritualism, the third chapter examines the tours given by Conan Doyle. The British doctor spent forty days in 1922 presenting twenty-five lectures, and forty days in 1923 giving another one hundred. The methods, notes, and practices used by Sir Arthur during the tour provide information on his opinions and the popular theories and explanations of Spiritualism. By looking at the cities, venues, and general demographics surrounding the tours, the popularity and concentration of spiritualist curiosity can be seen through the press coverage and challenges. Also investigated is the class, status, and connection people had to Spiritualism as a way to establish who attended the lectures and the level of support given to the tour. To verify the reputation of the lectures and to confirm the growing curiosity, it is important to concentrate on the level of reporting by

newspapers and magazines and the number and varying scale of challenges presented by the public.

Chapter four is centered on Harry Houdini's efforts to challenge Spiritualism in public as a showman and in the media as a publicist. Houdini gave around twenty-five lectures between 1923 and 1925. By delving deeper into the disagreements between Sir Arthur and Houdini, it is evident that the escape artist used the publicity for public awareness. While not on stage exposing fraudulent mediums, Houdini was writing books and telling reporters of his experiments as another way to warn the public. Although both men were not on the same lecture circuit at the same time, their challenges to each other also signify the intensity of their commitment and their recognition of the public interest in the tests. The two-year period and over one hundred fifty lectures suggest that public fascination with Spiritualism ebbed and flowed within each tour because of location, challenges, and amount of press coverage.

Although the lecture tours only lasted a short time, the impact of the speakers' varying attitudes and the experiments and conclusions presented, shaped public opinion. Press publicity and support of the growing interest further confirmed the desire to understand the questioned religion and practices. Harry Houdini and Sir Arthur Conan Doyle presented their tours and experiments with missionary zeal to attract skeptics and believers alike. Audiences gathered to hear the famed men speak of mystifying phenomena and seemingly unexplainable illusions, and public curiosity mirrored the lectures and challenges as time progressed.

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Abstract

This Master's thesis is constructed around the Spiritualist lecture tours of Harry Houdini and Sir Arthur Conan Doyle. The famed British author was an ardent Spiritualist who believed it was his personal mission to spread the religion and practices of Spiritualism in Europe, Australia, and America. Houdini, on the other hand, strove to expose deceitful mediums as con artists and fakes. In the early 1920s, both men embarked on lecture tours throughout the United States, spreading their views and attempting to sway the minds of curious Americans. The lectures were well attended, often before full houses, and were well publicized. This research makes use of Conan Doyle's writings, newspaper coverage and the correspondence of Houdini to examine the lectures and the public reactions and what they conveyed about American's attitudes toward Modern Spiritualism. Many historians have glanced at the tours and Spiritualism as part of a larger picture in the twentieth century, but this short-lived religious phenomena may help explain how and why Americans were intrigued about an odd, almost cult-like religion. Since there has not been an in depth look at the tours, this will fill a gap in the history of American's response to organized religion in the early twentieth century.

Chapter One

The Emergence of Modern Spiritualism in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries

Necromancy has been a long-standing practice, which dates back to Shaman ceremonies in North America. Rituals were conceived by the addition of magic and primitive forms of sorcery.¹ Spiritualism emerged as a remedy for superstition and the practices thrived as laymen clung to the idea of a supernatural life after death. Although mainstream North American religions eventually shunned Shamanism, the magic and superstition behind the customs were still alive in the minds of skeptics and believers.

During the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, American society embraced popular entertainment and showmanship primarily through Vaudeville and circus scenes. Magic² and unexplainable tricks fascinated audiences causing many to fixate on the ideas surrounding physical illusion. Magic shows emerged as a pastime and magicians were continuously mystifying their audiences with deceptive slight of hand tricks and escapes. Also emerging around the same time was the practice of Modern Spiritualism.³

¹ George Lawton, *The Drama of Life After Death: A Study of the Spiritualist Religion* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, Inc., 1932), x.

² For a more complete study on magic during the late nineteenth century please see Albert A. Hopkin, ed. *Magic: Stage Illusions and Scientific Diversions* (New York: Benjamin Blom, 1897). This source identifies specific stage magic used during most magic performances. For Houdini's own interpretation of magic please see Walter B. Gibson & Morris N. Young, *Houdini on Magic* (New York: Dover Publications, 1953) which is a compilation of edited articles written by Houdini on handcuffs, rope magic, escapes, spooks, and general magic tricks. For a more in depth study of Houdini's exposure of magic please see Harry Houdini, *Miracle Mongers and Their Methods: A Complete Expose* (New York: Prometheus Books, 1993).

³ Modern Spiritualism was the more contemporary version of the old Spiritualist practices seen throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Spiritualists believed that there had always been a tacit understanding that magic and Occultism were evident ideas in most religious practices, but Modern Spiritualism was actually regarded as a legitimate religion. The term "Spiritualism" is capitalized throughout this work because most people who deemed Spiritualism a legitimate religion also capitalized it to show respect and authenticity. Not everyone who was interested in Spiritualism claimed to believe completely in the religion, so the term "spiritualist" is not capitalized.

Spiritualism during the Victorian Era was a belief in the spiritual connection between spirits and humans through the work of a medium. The mystic mediums gathered willing participants together and created a calming atmosphere where through conjuring phenomena spirits could connect with those who were left behind on earth. For many people, Spiritualism offered comfort and a way to connect with the lost souls of their departed friends and family. Some sought to understand the theories behind their superstition. For other people, Spiritualism was a religion. This new belief differed from mainstream religion because of the apparent physical evidence of spirits working. This movement embraced the desire for empirical evidence and the need to find a connection with the afterlife. Much of that relationship stemmed from the ability to incorporate magical undertones with religious séance practices. Magic⁴ and physical illusion were seen as ways to mystify an audience with the use of tricks and performances to demonstrate a showman's ability to defy rational thinking. Spiritualists, to lure patrons to séances, also used some of the same measures taken by magicians.⁵

Spiritualists were reluctant to call their practices magic because that would decrease their credibility as religious or spiritualistic authorities. Magicians were equally hesitant to label their illusions Spiritualism because that would indicate belief in the practice or religion. However, magic, or physical illusion, and Spiritualism demonstrated constant parallels that allowed the two entities to overlap, and this intersection caused a wave of curiosity and enchantment to ripple through American society. Whether

⁴ The term "magic" will reference the notion of physical illusion as a form of trickery rather than a "dark art form" such as black magic.

⁵ Harry Houdini, *A Magician Among the Spirits* (Amsterdam, Holland: Fredonia Books, 2002), 244.

mediums or magicians claimed magic or religious belief, the result was entertainment and amusement for most people.⁶

Spiritualism first became popular in 1848 when two young sisters in Hydesville, New York, Katherine and Margaretta Fox, began making rapping noises on the walls of their parents' bedroom. Both sisters denied any connection with the sounds but because their parents were superstitious, a rumor spread that the sisters had magical powers. The sisters quickly expanded their abilities by using techniques such as muscle reading or the ability to move the muscles in one's face to trigger exaggerated cheek, brow, and mouth movement, and mesmerism, in which the girls fell into hypnotized trances for communication with the spirit world. The girls also used "toe-ology" which was the name given to the mysterious way the girls rapped against the walls and table.⁷ Maggie and Kate were able to crack their toes and create the rapping noise without revealing their supposed mystic powers.⁸ People soon came from all over the country to see the two girls perform their supernatural talents, and, not surprisingly, others began demonstrating similar talents thus enabling spiritualist thinking to grow and spread. People became engrossed in the girls' spiritual work because the sisters created phenomena that had never been seen. Because witnessing such mysteries resonated with most of the population, many new adherents were attracted to the new spiritual faith.⁹

⁶ Frank Podmore, *Modern Spiritualism: A History and a Criticism*, vol. I (London: Methuen & Co., 1902): 5, Ronald Pearsall, *The Table Rappers: The Victorians and the Occult* (Gloucestershire, England: Sutton Publishing, Ltd., 2004), 29.

⁷ Barbara Weisberg, *Talking to the Dead: Kate and Maggie Fox and the Rise of Spiritualism* (New York: HarperCollins, 2004), 123.

⁸ Eventually, Kate Fox publicly admitted using her toes as a means to create spirit communication thus causing a rift in the Spiritualist community.

⁹ Nancy Rubin Stuart, *The Reluctant Spiritualist: The Life of Maggie Fox* (New York: Harcourt, Inc, 2005), 43.

Modern Spiritualism was considered both a religion and a practice. Not everyone who practiced Spiritualism believed fully in the religion, but most believers focused on the religious aspects to support their theological views. Practitioners who simply went to a séance to contact a lost loved one generally did not understand or connect with the complications of the religion. Spiritualists identified with Christian beliefs, however, the rituals set the followers apart from the traditional values of most self-proclaiming Christians.¹⁰ Twenty-first century religious standards would not support Spiritualism as a Christian faith, but during the twentieth century, people not abiding by some form of Christianity would have been shunned by society.¹¹

The religion of Spiritualism revolves around seven spheres that the spirit travels through in order to reach heaven. Andrew Jackson Davis, in early the 1860s, was the major proponent of the spiritualist religion and he wrote most of the theological principles that practitioners believed in. Spiritualists did not have faith in hell, purgatory, or an end to spiritual life for the soul. Once a person's physical body dies, the soul lives on forever in one of the seven spheres. The soul serves as an intermediary between the body and spirit of a person.¹² A person's body is simply the means for the spirit to have a connection to the physical and material world. For spiritualists, death is only a stage in the journey and a means for denying the hold that death has over human life, a sense of immortality.¹³ The spirit spheres surround the world in belt form and each person has

¹⁰ Podmore, *Modern Spiritualism*, 215.

¹¹ Podmore, *Modern Spiritualism*, 217, 219. Most Christian religions in the twenty-first century would not support Spiritualism's lack of Biblical law, the idea that there is no hell, and the fact that a spirit travels through the Milky Way and is transferred to various spheres. Currently, no mainstream Christian group defends the practices of Spiritualism as a part of Christian doctrine and faith.

¹² Robert S. Cox, *Body and Soul: A Sympathetic History of American Spiritualism* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2003), 100.

¹³ Russell M. and Clare R. Goldfarb, *Spiritualism and Nineteenth-Century Letters* (Madison, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, date), 10.

their own individual spirit world, spirit planet, and spirit sphere which comprise the intersolar universe. Each sphere has its own circle of suns, which has its own spiritual zone, and each world is a different stage the soul encounters to reach Heaven. Sphere One and Two do not have specific names but their total belts span two thousand miles and they are the closest to the earth. The Third Sphere is The Summerland where the good souls go automatically, having skipped the first two spheres immediately after the death of the physical body. The Fourth Sphere, The Philosopher Sphere, is where the geniuses of the earth travel to relax after a long life of thinking for the good of mankind. The Fifth Sphere, Advanced Contemplative and Intellectual Sphere, is much like the Fourth Sphere but there is more perfection evident in the zone. The Six Sphere, Love Sphere, and the Seventh Sphere, Christ Sphere, is where the spirit eventually reaches heaven to dwell with Christ. It is the job of the spirit to perfect itself enough to have the ability to move through the spheres to eventually reach Christ.¹⁴

Those people who did not always support or understand the theology of Spiritualism found more comfort in séances and a medium's confidence in spirit relationships. Most mediums used various techniques to call spirits or to demonstrate to their audience, sitting around a table, that a spirit was in the room. Séance participants were not usually ardent believers in the religion but they were still interested in contacting a deceased loved one. The techniques used by the Fox sisters were rapidly duplicated throughout the United States and Europe, as people believed they had the similar psychic and spiritual powers.¹⁵

¹⁴ Lawton, *The Drama of Life After Death*, 36-71.

¹⁵ Pearsall, *The Table Rappers*, 32.

Spiritualism first became popular with middle-class housewives who developed the ability of reading minds, trance communication, and automatic writing (the ability of a medium, while in a trance, to write what the spirit is saying). These powers became tools for the mediums to lure superstitious and grieving people to séances, where they appeared to communicate with departed loved ones through trances and by voice activation.¹⁶ The participants in the séance would sit in a circle and hold hands, while the medium would sit at the head of the table with his or her hands laced with the other members and his or her feet underneath a participant's foot. The restraint prevented the medium from using body parts to manipulate any instrument to produce spiritual phenomena. Participants would use these forms of control to ensure the medium's integrity and to determine if the séance was credible. The medium proceeded to call upon the spirits to give a sign of recognition and appearance. A bell would ring, a trumpet would sound, the table would be lifted off the ground, or the spirit would call into a megaphone to announce its presence. The medium would then ask questions of the spirit and receive confirmation through any number of actions such as bell ringing, rapping, knocking over cabinets, throwing megaphones, or verbal or written answers through the medium. Mediums even produced ectoplasm, a slimy liquid, from their own bodies as other evidence of their connection to the spirits.¹⁷ Spirit photography and musical séances were the most popular ways for mediums to attract people to their séances.¹⁸ Many

¹⁶ R. Laurence Moore, "The Spiritualist Medium: A Study of Female Professionalism in Victorian America," *American Quarterly* 27 (May 1975): 204.

¹⁷ Leon Lansbery, "Ectoplasm-Does It Exist?" newspaper clipping, Harry Houdini Scrapbook, microfilm Library of Congress.

¹⁸ "Houdini Raps Psychic Tricks," *Cincinnati Ohio Commercial Tribune*, November 16, 1924, Harry Houdini Scrapbook, microfilm, Library of Congress, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, *The History of Spiritualism* (Newcastle Upon Tyne, England: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2009), 172-175.

people, no matter their class or status, felt a connection to mediums, who they believed gave comfort and connected them to their lost spirit.¹⁹

Spiritualism and mediumship spread rapidly particularly among the working class because the practice offered opportunity for higher status recognition and another source of income.²⁰ Besides the middle-class housewives, upper-class women also participated in séances at the urging of their husbands, who usually found Spiritualism to be intellectually or scientifically intriguing. Mediumship became a source for women's rights because of the position of authority women mediums were given within society.²¹

Women mediums usually fell into one, or more, of three categories. Most skeptics questioned the honesty, credibility, and capability of a medium. If a medium's legitimacy was questioned, did she have the right to charge a fee? An honest medium was respected for her skills; whereas a stingy medium was called a crook. Mediums were often characterized by their credibility or lack thereof. Laymen and scholars alike examined a medium's techniques to establish whether or not practices were merely tricks. Lastly, if a medium was considered believable and trustworthy, then she was typically given the status of competent, genuine medium.²²

Women, especially during this age, faced difficulty in proving legitimate spiritualistic knowledge because they were generally considered less accomplished and did not have proper training as mediums. Those who attended a séance were very critical of mediums' techniques, while those who were superstitious or scientific tested the

¹⁹R. Lawrence Moore, *In Search of White Crows: Spiritualism, Parapsychology, and American Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), 3.

²⁰Janet Oppenheim, *The Other World: Spiritualism and Psychical Research in England, 1850-1914* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 39.

²¹Anne Braude, *Radical Spirits: Spiritualism and Women's Rights in Nineteenth-Century America* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1989), 82.

²²Moore, "The Spiritualist Medium," 201-203.

medium. The public questioned women's abilities in particular because they did not have proper spiritual training that some men received.²³ Male mediums, usually vaudevillians, were often tutored by an accomplished male medium as a form of proper training. By establishing themselves as legitimate mediums, women hoped to gain considerable respect for their abilities and be revered as successful mediums. However, even if they established themselves as legitimate, many mediums' motives were questioned. William Britten, spiritual revivalist and husband of famed medium Emma Britten, suggested the establishment of a "School of the Prophets" so mediums could have formal training in righteous moral behavior, proper gift culture, and the theories of religious and scientific methods.²⁴

A medium first of all faced the difficult task of establishing a reputation for honesty. Many mediums were accused of falsifying their abilities to exploit and profit from unsuspecting people. A common skeptical argument suggested that mediums should not have been paid for their professional work if their profession required little to no training.²⁵ Anyone had the capability of posing as a medium since there were no specific qualifications involved and although mediums could have specific religious or scientific training, very few claimed to have such legitimate knowledge. Some mediums had the benefit of learning from other experienced and famed Spiritualists, but most claimed powers that came to them naturally. There were different assumptions made of private sittings and of public displays. Private sittings provided a more intimate setting for a

²³ Moore, "The Spiritualist Medium," 201.

²⁴ Emma Britten, *Art and Magic: Mundane, Sub-Mundane and Super-Mundane; Spiritism: A Treatise* (New York: William Britten, 1876), 457.

²⁵ Robert Lee Jacobs, Houdini Souvenir Program of Last Full Show 1926, (Pomeroy OH: Lee Jacobs Productions, 1997), 12, Souvenir Program clipping, Harry Houdini Scrapbook, microfilm, Library of Congress.

medium to work, but that did not give her the ability to demonstrate her credibility in public.²⁶ By establishing themselves as legitimate mediums, women hoped to gain considerable respect for their skills and be revered as successful mediums. However, even if they established themselves as legitimate, still many mediums' motives were questioned.

The majority of mediums, whether claiming supernatural skills or a background in magic, all fell into the same showman category when conducting a séance. Each medium needed to present an alluring display of parlor games to satisfy the growing curiosity of their guests. Few mediums would readily admit to their own version of popular entertainment, but each spiritualist used a different method to captivate participants. Common activities included the use of balloons, musical instruments, furniture, slates, and ectoplasm. Each medium generally had a specific skill that he or she claimed to be a specialty and in doing so, advertised their skill to their patrons to ensure continuous sittings.²⁷ Magic and the ideas surrounding physical illusion became the key component of each séance, whether stated outright during the séance, or not, the practices were defined by tricks. Mediums undoubtedly denied the use of definitions such as magic because of the negative connotation, instead using terms such as phenomena, open spiritual communication, and supernormal character.²⁸

Some of the most famous mediums of the twentieth century were able to create a stir between religious officials, scientists, and even press reporters. Mina Crandon, also known as Margery and Emma Britten, were among the most celebrated and popular

²⁶ Amy Lehman, *Victorian Women and the Theatre of Trance: Mediums, Spiritualists and Mesmerists in Performance* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers, 2009), 90.

²⁷ George Lawton, "Spiritualism-A Contemporary American Religion," *The Journal of Religion*, 10, no.1 (January 1930): 49.

²⁸ Arthur Conan Doyle, *The History of Spiritualism*, 41.

mediums in the world. Margery fought the *Scientific American* committee and Harry Houdini for the prize of ten thousand dollars and the title of legitimate medium.²⁹ Emma Britten, a famed British medium, established a spiritualist newspaper and wrote endlessly to secure a rightful place for Spiritualism in the mainstream religious community.³⁰

Euspia Palladino, another famed medium, was an Italian, working class immigrant who demonstrated her skills as a medium by winning over many men of science with her specially made séance table.³¹ Palladino was an example of how working class women were able to use their non-academic abilities to gain credibility in the spiritualist community. Many scientific committees studied Palladino's techniques and the table she used in her séances. Incredulous sitters questioned why one of her table's legs was shorter than the rest and why she would hide her foot under her dress during the proceedings.³² Refusing to move her foot or have a screen placed around her dress, Palladino was able to stir up more controversy. Some scientists believed her lack of cooperation was a sign of fraud, while others showed more curiosity in her work.

Most people who were attracted to Spiritualism were not the wealthy or the severely impoverished, but the more educated middle class. Although there were mediums that catered to the rich and famous and others who focused on the working poor, the educated middle class provided the most inquisitive thoughts and speculation. The middle class also had more leisure time and economic flexibility than the working

²⁹ "Margery Fails," *Buffalo Express*, 1924, newspaper clipping, Harry Houdini Scrapbook, microfilm, Library of Congress.

³⁰ Emma Hardinge Britten, *Nineteenth Century Miracles or Spirits and Their Work in Every Country of the Earth* (reprint 1899, New York: Arno Press, 1976), 3.

³¹ "Human Enigmas: No. 8-Eusapia Palladino," *Greensboro Daily News*, November 23, 1924, newspaper clipping, Harry Houdini Scrapbook, microfilm, Library of Congress.

³² Frank Podmore, *The Newer Spiritualism*, (reprint 1910, New York: Arno Press, 1975), 91.

class. The wealthy patrons generally had a more specialized interest in specific mediums or other outlets for their income.³³

By the 1920s, there were over six hundred spiritualist churches and over fifty thousand people who claimed to believe in the religion of Spiritualism. The number of people who believed in Spiritualism was significantly higher, as many did not attend these churches, yet they participated in séances and genuinely believed in Spiritualism. However, not all people who believed in Spiritualism considered themselves ardent spiritualists, so the number only reflects those who attended a spiritualist church. Spiritualist churches were actually a rarity because the religion lacked a hierarchy and an organized and formal structure. Many people did not attend a spiritualist church, but they did attend séances given by mediums that did not count their homes as churches. The studies done only give a small percentage of people who attended séances or who aligned themselves with some type of spiritualist belief, thus leaving the opinion of the American public up to the press.³⁴

Arguably, the most interested faction devoted to Spiritualism, whether positive or negative, was the American and British press. The press was not simply local journals or periodicals, but also national, religious, and scientific magazines and newspapers. There were numerous spiritualist newspapers and magazines printed exclusively for believers: *Spiritual Magazine, the Medium and Daybreak, Spiritualist Newspaper, Light, and Two Worlds*.³⁵ Other mainstream newspapers that described both positives and negatives were the *New York Tribune, The Philadelphia Inquirer, San Francisco Times, and Associated Press of London*, to name a few. Scientific journals like *The Scientific American* and

³³ Oppenheim, *The Other World*, 29.

³⁴ Lawton, *The Drama of Life After Death*, 137,147,156-157.

³⁵ Oppenheim, *The Other World*, 44.

magazines like *Variety*, *Metropolitan*, *New Yorker*, and *The World Magazine* all took an interest in the growing popularity of Spiritualism. Because there were not many other forms of communication and news coverage, most people had access to some type of printed material, and both Spiritualist advocates and adversaries alike used the press to reach out to the American public and to stimulate curiosity, belief, and skepticism.³⁶

Victorian, or Modern, Spiritualism paved the way for these new approaches as belief in spirit interaction dominated mainstream religious thought. Although Modern Spiritualism did not gain the amount of support Catholic or Protestant sects maintained, the practice and religion nevertheless boasted a strong following. In many instances the size of the spiritualist circles were attributed to the use of empirical evidence as a means of attracting more participants. Most mainstream Christian religions required blind faith in God, who was not seen or heard and therefore was difficult for people to understand or believe because of the lack of tangible materialism.³⁷ Spiritualism offered the idea of physical illusion and the notion that anyone had the ability to hear, see, and even touch a spirit.³⁸ People were drawn to Spiritualism because of the connection they could have with an actual spirit rather than simply having faith in them.³⁹

³⁶ Lawton, *The Drama of Life After Death*, 159.

³⁷ One of the most accepted psychical definitions of materialism or materialization in the nineteenth century comes from Edward Bennett *Psychic Phenomena: A Brief Account of the Physical Manifestations Observed in Physical Research* (New York: Edinburgh, Scotland: T.C & E.C., 1906), 109-110. Bennett writes that “materialisation of the whole figure is meant, the production of a figure which to the spectator appears as a new human being, so to speak, occasionally exhibiting signs of independent organic life.”

³⁸ Sheri Weinstein, “Technologies of Vision: Spiritualism and Science in the Nineteenth-Century America,” *Spectral America*, ed. by Jeffrey Andrew Weinstock (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2004), 126.

³⁹ Most accepted mainstream religious sects, popular in the twentieth century, were generally Christian, namely Protestant. There were generally strict rules surrounding the teachings of the Bible and most Christians accepted the idea of heaven and hell. Other non-Christian sects were pushed to the fringes and there was little tolerance for cult-like practices. Spiritualists claimed that their traditions and rituals were Christian in nature because they believed in God and the notion of an afterlife. Although

Nineteenth and twentieth century phases of Spiritualism had many of the same critics that questioned mediums' abilities and motivations, séance procedures and test conditions, and the legitimacy and practices of the religion. Most critics were clergymen, either Catholic or Protestant, members of the scientific community, and laymen of all classes. Ministers and priests alike fought against the spread of Spiritualism mostly with religious revivals and printed material. Most scientists had backgrounds in phrenology, psychology, and chemistry, and focused their efforts in establishing psychical research societies to study necromancy. Laymen, usually not knowing much about spiritualist theology or scientific experiments, questioned Spiritualism through superstition and visual skepticism. Members of all three groups could be seen sitting in séances, writing to newspapers probing spiritualists for answers, and attending lectures and public events devoted to Spiritualism.⁴⁰

Religious authorities did not accept Spiritualism as a religion because they were very suspicious of the factors behind it. Most religious authorities believed that it was possible to commune with the dead but not with souls. Spiritualism jeopardized this doctrine of Christianity and religious officials needed to regain lost converts. Many skeptical Christians believed that Spiritualism was a way to ruin men's souls. Religiously, souls are separated from the body and pass to the afterlife, and if the soul cannot be contacted there is no factual evidence for the phenomena. In part, religion was used to counteracting Spiritualism by attesting to conventional religious belief that the soul can only be connected with God and that mediums were unable to make the

Spiritualism's connection to Christianity was questioned by many clergymen, and even considered an abomination by some, Spiritualists still showed a commitment to mainstream Christianity.

⁴⁰ "Houdini Raps Mystic Rappers," May 6, 1923, *Sunday News*, newspaper clipping, Harry Houdini Scrapbook, microfilm, Library of Congress.

connection between loved ones and the deceased spirits. Many believers in Spiritualism were attracted to materialism and most clergymen tried to discourage people from believing in the fallacies of physical proof. Church officials believed that practices of prayer, faith, and Christ would lead those who strayed back to Christianity.⁴¹

Conservative, Protestant ministers such as Charles Beecher believed in Biblically based evidence that God was the only channel of communication a soul could have between Heaven and Earth and that any other communication was evidence of the Devil's deception.⁴² Spiritualists would counter Beecher's argument by suggesting that the Bible was full of phenomena created by mediums and thus presented a concrete conformation in Spiritualism's favor.⁴³

Scientists approached Spiritualism differently than religious figures because empirical evidence was crucial for reliability. More opposition came from the religious community than from scientific fields, but more scientists were curious than out to dissuade parishioners.⁴⁴ Scientists believed there was more room for error and fraud if scientific theory was not approached with an unbiased mind.⁴⁵ However, practice of scientific experiments during the séance allowed scientists to also determine the illegitimacy of a medium's techniques. By identifying the fallacies through science, investigators reasoned that the mediums' work was proven unreliable. Scientists like William Crookes, Oliver Lodge, William James, Edward Bennett, and Hereward Carrington examined a number of mediums and participated in numerous séances and

⁴¹ Oppenheim, *The Other World*, 63-64.

⁴² R. Laurence Moore, "Spiritualism and Science: Reflections on the First Decade of Spiritual Rappings," *American Quarterly* 24, no. 4 (October 1972): 490.

⁴³ Lawton, *The Drama of Life After Death*, 560.

⁴⁴ Moore, "Spiritualism and Science," 493.

⁴⁵ Ruth Brandon, *Spiritualists: The Passion for the Occult in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries* (New York: Knopf, 1983), 84.

most found some aspect of Spiritualism believable.⁴⁶ Carrington even used machines such as a galvanometer and a spirit dictaphone during séances to further refute or confirm other critical arguments.⁴⁷

Mediums required darkness and specific working conditions, but scientists were reluctant to allow any special treatment. Science was an increasingly prominent study during the Victorian Age due to recent additions of chemistry, physics, and biology, thereby enabling scientists to conduct experiments to prove Spiritualism faulty or true. Scientists disputed whether or not Spiritualism fell under the realm of science because mental telepathy was not necessarily spiritualistic, although it was seen as a connection between the living mediums and the dead spirits. But Spiritualism did not use typical scientific tools; instead mediums used tables, ectoplasm, and musical instruments to demonstrate their scientific abilities.⁴⁸ Musical instruments were heard, painted balloons floated overhead, and a slimy substance oozed from a medium to signify a spirit's presence. Unfortunately, the common spiritualist participant did not fully recognize or comprehend the dimensions of scientific experimentation. Professional psychologists and scientists found that most of society was not interested in the psychological aspects of Spiritualism. Generally most of the psychical, psychological, or phrenology associated

⁴⁶ Sir Oliver Lodge, "I Have Talked with the Dead," *New York American*, December 27, 1914, newspaper clipping, Harry Houdini Scrapbook, microfilm, Library of Congress, "As Sir William Crookes Sees Spiritualism," newspaper clipping, no author, publisher, or date, Harry Houdini Scrapbook, microfilm, Library of Congress, "Awaiting Spirit Messages from W.T. Stead, Isaac K. Funk, William James, Richard Hodgson," *The World Magazine*, May 19, 1912, magazine clipping, Harry Houdini Scrapbook, microfilm, Library of Congress.

⁴⁷ "Testing Spiritualism By Machinery: Science Tackles the Greatest Mystery of the Age," *Sunday Evening Telegraph*, September 25, 1921, newspaper clipping, Harry Houdini Scrapbook, microfilm, Library of Congress. A galvanometer detects the change in electrical current and in the case of spiritual activity; the needle would register depending on the strength of a spirit's electricity. A spirit dictaphone is used to record any spirit sound or message that may be transmitted to a medium during a séance.

⁴⁸ Weinstein, "Technologies of Vision," 127.

with Spiritualism was studied at a psychical society in New York or London or by independent scholars.⁴⁹

Laymen's interpretation of Spiritualism was based more on unscholarly and nonreligious theories, but the press, mediums, and the rest of the general public still found their skepticism valid. Most people did not know the theology behind the spiritualist religion, nor did they understand what forms of incomprehensible science made the room glow eerily with white smoke. What most laymen did question was a spiritualist's faith in God, how a medium was able to create an apparition in a seemingly unplanned setting, and what powers did a person possess in order to communicate with the dead.⁵⁰ The majority of questions were based on pure skepticism, but others were careful to pay close attention. Other people simply enjoyed the tricks and were willing to pay for the medium's abilities without questioning their credibility.⁵¹

Twentieth century American society embraced a number of skeptical and unexplainable phenomena. Technological advances like the wireless telegraph; religious phenomena produced by mediums; and scientific hypothesis like the theory of relativity, all demonstrated American's ability to believe in things that have a tangible surface meaning, but also an essence of wonderment and disbelief. The idea of a wireless telegraph (radio) that produced enough power through magnetic waves to stretch across

⁴⁹ The American Society for Psychical Research, the Society for Psychical Research in London, and the London Dialectical Society, the *Scientific American* committee are just a few of the many groups devoted to the study of Spiritualism and the Occult.

⁵⁰ "To the Editor of the *New York Times*," *New York Times*, June 3, 1923, newspaper clipping, Harry Houdini Scrapbook, microfilm, Library of Congress, Samuel A. Jacoby, *The Immortality of the Soul* (Los Angeles: The Austin Publishing Co., 1931). Jacoby was a Protestant layman who fervently believed in God, but when his wife died he went to numerous séances and Spiritualist Churches and according to his account, he was able to contact her with the aid of a medium. Jacoby never wavered from his faith in Christianity, but he adopted Spiritualism because he questioned his own connection with God within his denomination and within Spiritualism.

⁵¹ "Spiritualists Trust Scraps Its Victims When They're Thru: Professional Medium Reveals How Heartless Nation-Wide Organization Operates," April, 11, newspaper clipping, Harry Houdini Scrapbook, microfilm, Library of Congress.

an entire ocean was a fantastic thought that one had to see it to believe.⁵² Most people did not understand the theories involved with science and technology, but had some amount of confidence in the new experiments. Likewise, Spiritualism displayed a concrete example of spirit activity, but it also required an amount of faith in the ideas of the practice and religion. Americans were attempting to embrace and understand the unexplainable and to determine whether faith or practicality would govern societal thought.

Americans also faced the decision between faith and practicality even in entertainment venues like circuses and Vaudeville. Most people went to a sideshow to be amused with seemingly mystifying stunts or even impractical and spectacular acts. Vaudeville, of course, included not only acts based on magic and illusion but also sketches by comedians, and performances by singers, and dancers. Each act had a special flair and uniqueness to it, and the traveling performances became popular as a source of leisure and amusement. Some of the most admired acts were those involving magic and unexplainable stunts. Vaudeville headliners received the most attention during a show because there were only eight acts a night. Generally each performance was only approximately eighteen minutes, unless a longer show was booked for evening performances. Within that short span of time the entertainer impressed the audience with tricks and feats of amazement then he or she would exit the stage and the next performer would take a turn. Theatres, like B.F. Keith's, Edward Albee's, or Martin Beck's, were prime entertainment sites for families, where they could see fire-eaters, needle and sword

⁵² "To The Editor of the New York Times."

swallowers, strong men, escape artists, and stuntmen mystify audiences with fantastic deeds and accomplishments.⁵³

Vaudeville managers showed off mediums and mystical séances, booked lecture halls, theatres, and large open venues. Steen-Smith Refined Entertainers presented “Spiritualist Manifestations,” and “Spiritualism On Trial by a Jury of the People at Large,” at the Grand Opera House in California, “Dr. Alex Hume and Kate Hume: Spirit Power in Full Gas Light!” was presented at the Valentine Theatre in Toledo, Ohio, to name just a few of the widely publicized spiritualist attractions.⁵⁴

Vaudevillians, who claimed legitimate mediumship, also avoided negative or uneducated phrases to attract a well-rounded audience. Daniel, an acclaimed sleight of hand artist and ventriloquist, attempted to promote “honest” trickery on his entertainment posters with phrases like: “Not cheap, vulgar or suggestive show, but a moral refined entertainment, appealing to the educated public.”⁵⁵ However, he did note that his séances emanate a certain amount of trickery in his “up-to-the-minute entertainment of Magical Deception, introducing a galaxy of tricks with objects too numerous to mention, among which is a demonstration in the so-called ‘spiritualistic séance’ and the occult sciences.”⁵⁶ Numerous Vaudeville posters and promotional flyers were advertised a few days or even weeks in advance to attract people’s attention. Daniel’s magical and spiritualistic Vaudeville act was a top headliner because of a continuous interest in physical illusion.

⁵³ Charles W. Stein, *American Vaudeville: As Seen By Its Contemporaries* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1984), xi,xiii.

⁵⁴ “Spiritualist Manifestations,” clipping, Harry Houdini Scrapbook, microfilm, Library of Congress, “Spiritualism On Trial by a Jury of the People at Large,” no publisher, no date, newspaper clipping, Harry Houdini Scrapbook, microfilm, Library of Congress, “Dr. Alex Hume and Kate Hume,” no publisher, no date, Harry Houdini Scrapbook. microfilm, Library of Congress.

⁵⁵ “Coming! That ‘Entertaining Entertainer Daniel,’” no publisher, no date, newspaper clipping, Harry Houdini Scrapbook, microfilm, Library of Congress.

⁵⁶ “Coming! That ‘Entertaining Entertainer Daniel.”

Mediumship closely bordered showmanship, which was seen in private séances, but most often on Vaudeville stages.

Magicians used the same tricks performed at séances in their own popular Vaudeville shows as a method of revealing spiritual illusions. Two other popular showmen who staged séance tricks were Ira and William Davenport. During one of their mock séances, “musical instruments, bells, etc., were placed on a table; the Davenport Brothers were then manacled, hands and feet, and securely bonded to the chairs by ropes.” After the lights went out, “the bells were loudly rung; the trumpets made knocks on upon the floor, *and the tambourine appeared running around the room, jingling with all its might.*”⁵⁷ The Davenport Brothers were skilled magicians and were able to escape the ropes and manacles and fabricate the tambourine and bell sounds during the séance. The purpose of these artificial séances was to produce the same type of conditions and tricks used by mediums to identify magical elements for various audiences.

Vaudeville and the practice of Spiritualism overlapped not only with certain tricks, but also with props and techniques. Although not all séances were performed in a Vaudeville setting, most mediums used tricks similar to those found on the Vaudeville circuit. Juggling luminously painted materials or using fishing poles to create the illusion of a floating object were techniques used by mediums to dupe sitters. Harry Houdini used the same props in his stage séances, investigation of fraudulent mediums, and Vaudeville acts to demonstrate his abilities as an illusionist. Mediums also used the same tools as Vaudevillians and they generally came from a Vaudeville props catalogue. The Vaudeville and Circus Goods Company in Chicago, Illinois, was the most popular prop

⁵⁷ Houdini, *A Magician Among the Spirits*, 25.

distributor to both mediums (legitimate or not) and Vaudeville performers.⁵⁸ Whether the tools were for séances on stage, or for private use, evidence of spiritual workings and magical illusions in both popular entertainment and actual religious practices created a middle ground for the fascinated American public.⁵⁹

One of the most fascinating Vaudeville showmen was Harry Houdini, who embraced Spiritualism as another way to make money. A master magician, Houdini could escape from any locked box, can, packaging crate, bag, jail cell, handcuff, manacle, sealed coffin, chain, straightjacket, watertight container, or safe, as well as jump from any bridge, building, or plane while performing a stunt. Houdini was introduced to Spiritualism in sideshows and through his experience with illusion he and his wife, Bess, were able to devise new methods of tricking people to believe these spiritual marvels. From the beginning of his career, Houdini always claimed to be open minded and willing to accept Spiritualism as a true religion, if there was sufficient factual evidence to confirm the practice.⁶⁰

While Houdini was playing Vaudeville theatres in the United States, another showman, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle was intriguing readers with his mystery novels about Sherlock Holmes. He was first introduced to Spiritualism when he was in the Southsea, England practicing medicine.⁶¹ It was not until 1916 that Conan Doyle admitted his interest in Spiritualism. After joining the London Spiritualist Alliance, Conan Doyle

⁵⁸ “The Men Behind the Guns,” *Vaudeville & Circus Goods Co.*, props catalogue in the Harry Houdini Scrapbook, microfilm, Library of Congress.

⁵⁹ Trav S.D. *No Applause Just Throw Money: The Book that Made Vaudeville Famous* (New York: Faber and Faber, 2005), 22.

⁶⁰ Harry Houdini, *A Magician Among Spirits*, xix.

⁶¹ Arthur Conan Doyle, *A Life in Letters*, Jon Lellenberg, et al. (New York: The Penguin Press, 2007), 14.

spent many years giving lecture tours and speaking engagements around the world devoted to the study of Spiritualism.

Both Houdini and Conan Doyle exhibited their own idea of showmanship during their careers. Houdini was a showman because of the nature of his work. The art of escape required a masterful understanding of what mystified the public mind. Conan Doyle, although not a Vaudeville performer, understood how to appeal to an audience and create the same following as Houdini. The American public would see these two men as rivals, sometimes friends, but most of all, they would be remembered as entertainers.

Chapter Two

The Early Interest in Modern Spiritualism: Harry Houdini and Sir Arthur Conan Doyle

At the dawn of the twentieth century, Americans and Europeans alike were confounded by steady changes and new innovations evident in everyday life. With the emergence of new technology, entertainment, and political concerns, many people were swept up in the mysteries that were difficult to solve or explain. Harry Houdini and Sir Arthur Conan Doyle grasped the attention of kings and paupers and they were able to mesmerize crowds with their talents. Both men were a confirmation of the mystery society was attracted to, both as showmen and as innovators. Houdini and Conan Doyle's early lives shed light on their future interest in Spiritualism and each man used his rise to fame to support his passion in the argument over religion.

Arthur Ignatius Conan Doyle was born to Charles and Mary Doyle in rural Scotland, on May 22, 1859.¹ As a young boy he became interested in writing and he wrote a thirty-page story at the age of four. His family was impressed with his eagerness and ability to write so he was sent to Stonyhurst College in England, in 1869.² After graduating with honors in 1875, he was admitted to Edinburgh University in 1876 to study medicine. Following a successful, yet poverty stricken four years as a medical student, Conan Doyle struggled to establish a practice in Southsea, England. After his

¹ When Arthur was born his mother added the name Conan to produce the joint last name Conan Doyle for him and several of his five surviving siblings. The name comes from Arthur's great-uncle Michael Conan, a politically active Irish journalist. Although Conan Doyle was born in Scotland and was of Irish descent, he always referred to himself as an Englishman.

² Arthur Conan Doyle, *A Life in Letters*, Jon Lellenberg, et al. (New York: The Penguin Press, 2007), 17-23. Most of the biographical information provided comes from the edited letter collection Conan Doyle left at his estate.

marriage to Louisa Hawkins in 1885, Conan Doyle was restless for more medical training and a chance to write.³

In March and April 1886, Conan Doyle spent six weeks writing his first Sherlock Holmes novella, *A Study in Scarlet*. Several publishers turned down the piece, and disheartened, Conan Doyle turned to a penny magazine, *Beeton's Christmas Annual*, as his final publisher in 1887.⁴ His story was well received, yet he was still unable to convince a more prestigious publisher. After a slow start, Conan Doyle was able to publish six more stories by 1891 and each new publication fueled his growing popularity.⁵ The stories were clever and provided a mystery that was both cunningly written and difficult to solve. The novels provided extra income for the Doyles and eventually for their two children Mary and Kingsley. Along with the increase in earnings, Conan Doyle was invited to literary events and given warm receptions by upper class intellectuals and authors. Conan Doyle's time and creativity was in high demand and he spent long hours on literary tours and late nights writing in his study. Between 1891 and 1893 Conan Doyle successfully wrote six more novellas and killed Holmes before Holmes killed him.⁶

After a tiresome writing stint lasting over ten years, Conan Doyle was ready to move from Sherlock Holmes and refocus his interests. Doyle joined the Society for Psychological Research, traveled to America with his brother Innes, and he eventually joined the British Royal Army as a war correspondent in Egypt in 1896.⁷ Conan Doyle only

³ Conan Doyle, *A Life in Letters*, 236, 239, 245.

⁴ Conan Doyle, *A Life in Letters*, 247-248.

⁵ John Dickson Carr, *The Life of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1948), 63.

⁶ Conan Doyle, *A Life in Letters*, 285, 296, 305, 310.

⁷ Conan Doyle, *A Life in Letters*, 330, 337, 371.

spent a short time in Egypt and moved his family to the English countryside where he built a large mansion and continued to write. By 1899, Conan Doyle published another novel and he was pleased when his Sherlock Holmes novels were produced into a profitable play. Unfortunately, the outbreak of war in South Africa between the Britons and the Boers shook the author's comfortable life. Conan Doyle volunteered to serve but the army rejected him because the War Office would not grant a commission to a civilian. Since he was unable to enlist, Conan Doyle traveled to South Africa on his own to serve as a medical surgeon in December of 1899. The war was physically and mentally straining on him and Conan Doyle attempted to resist disease and infection. Conan Doyle served a little over one year in South Africa, and would publish his account and experiences in war in his 1901 book, *War Impressions* and *The War in South Africa: Its Causes and Conduct*. Upon his return, Conan Doyle emerged as a contender for Parliament, was knighted by King Edward VII for his service in South Africa, brought Sherlock Holmes back to life, and suffered through the death of his wife, Louisa. Not soon after his first wife's death, Conan Doyle married Jean Leckie, a long-time friend.⁸

After his second marriage, Conan Doyle tried to settle down and concentrate on writing. He produced a play, a pamphlet defending the Congo Free State, and a new novel, *The Lost World*. By 1914, the tensions of World War One were evident all over England and Conan Doyle, along with his son Kingsley, enlisted as volunteers. Conan Doyle stayed away from heavy action, but Kingsley was seriously wounded in the trenches in 1917. As Kingsley made his way home to recover, Conan Doyle began his involvement in the London Spiritualist Alliance. The first evidence of Conan Doyle's interest came in his defense of Sir Oliver Lodge in an article in *The Strand Magazine*.

⁸ Conan Doyle, *A Life in Letters*, 235-545, 434, 436.

Previously, Conan Doyle was a practicing Catholic, but after the death of his wife, he sought a more holistic approach to religion and spirituality.⁹ And with Kingsley not recovering as fast as doctors hoped, nevertheless, Conan Doyle turned to his growing spiritual faith as a form of comfort. In a letter to his mother, Mary Doyle, he wrote, “I do not fear death for the boy, for since I have become a convinced Spiritualist death became rather an unnecessary thing.”¹⁰

In October 1917, Conan Doyle presented his first address to the London Spiritualist Alliance entitled, “The New Revelation,” which he later published as a book. The author wrote to his mother of his growing interest in the modern spiritualist movement and the problem most clergymen had with materialism, and his “new revelation” would demonstrate his support for the movement.¹¹ After the success of his address, Conan Doyle devoted much time and energy to the movement by writing to the *Light*, a spiritualist newspaper, and attempting to spread his newfound beliefs with missionary zeal. “I seem to see a second Reformation coming in this country,” Conan Doyle wrote to his brother Innes, “The folk await a message, and the message is there. I hope some stronger & more worthy messenger than I may carry it but I should be proud to be a Lieutenant.”¹²

As 1918 approached, Conan Doyle decided to begin his first spiritualist lecture tour in England. Focusing on psychical research, he traveled and lectured tirelessly and never accepted a fee because he believed he could “not make money in sacred things.”¹³ Each of his lectures lasted an hour and a half and generally he lectured six out of seven

⁹ Conan Doyle, *A Life in Letters*, 568, 583, 624.

¹⁰ Conan Doyle, *A Life in Letters*, 625.

¹¹ Conan Doyle, *A Life in Letters*, 634.

¹² Conan Doyle, *A Life in Letters*, 636.

¹³ Conan Doyle, *A Life in Letters*, 639.

days so more people could be reached. At one of his most attended lectures, eight thousand men listened to Conan Doyle speak for fifteen hours in the rain. By this time eleven thousand copies of his book, *New Revelation*, had been sold and there was still a growing demand.¹⁴ His second book on Spiritualism, *The Vital Message*, was published in 1918 and in it he noted that Spiritualism was possible because of a person's ability to connect with a departed soul. Conan Doyle also attended hundreds of séances to test the legitimacy of the mediums, yet he did not "jump to conclusions...as many critics do."¹⁵

By the end of October 1918, Kingsley had contracted influenza and was suffering badly. During a lecture, Conan Doyle received a telegram that Kingsley was dying from his ailments, yet he did not leave the lecture hall. Another telegram arrived and Conan Doyle was informed that his son had died. Grieved, yet faithful, he later penned, "As it was, I was able to go straight on the platform and tell the meeting that I knew my son had survived the grave, and that there was no need to worry."¹⁶ Kingsley's death only increased Conan Doyle's enthusiasm for the spiritualist movement. He became determined to speak with his son and he was confident of that achievement through the help of mediums and séances. From 1918 to 1920, Conan Doyle continuously lectured throughout England and maintained a favorable status among spiritualists and skeptics alike. In a letter to his brother, Innes, Conan Doyle explained his feelings about Spiritualism: "I write and think a good deal about Spiritualism—to use that title so dirtied by rogues. I feel more and more that the revelation in our day is supplementary to that of Christ, and far the most important thing since that date."¹⁷

¹⁴ Conan Doyle, *A Life in Letters*, 644, 646-647.

¹⁵ Conan Doyle, *A Life in Letters*, 648.

¹⁶ Conan Doyle, *A Life in Letters*, 648.

¹⁷ Conan Doyle, *A Life in Letters*, 651.

For the majority of his life, Sir Arthur was positively influenced by religion because of constant encouragement from religious institutions. After he went to Stonyhurst he was educated in a Jesuit school in Austria and continued to follow Catholic teachings during the early part of his life.¹⁸ After fighting in several wars, having his first wife Louisa, his son Kingsley, his brother Innes, and his mother Mary pass away, Conan Doyle had endured much hardship and grief, but this only strengthened his desire to connect with them and to prove the legitimacy of Spiritualism. He never flaunted his fame as an author, doctor, war hero, or spiritualist, yet his reputation provided the popularity he needed to maintain an active and interested audience. Although Conan Doyle humbled himself in front of his admirers, he nevertheless shaped how audiences perceived his professional work, but also his work as a showman. As people flocked from all over England to hear Conan Doyle speak on Spiritualism, Harry Houdini was also entertaining crowds with his art of escape.¹⁹

Ehrich Weiss was born in Hungary in 1874 to Mayer Samuel and Cecilia Weiss. The surname Weisz was changed to Weiss when the family immigrated to the United States in 1876. Ehrich Weiss would legally change his name to Harry Houdini because it was a more appealing name for his acts. “Ehrie” was Houdini’s nickname as a child, which eventually became Harry. The name Houdini came from the famed French conjurer Robert Houdin. The family of seven immigrated to America in 1876 because Mayer Samuel secured a job as a rabbi in Appleton, Wisconsin. During Houdini’s early life the family scraped by and he took odd jobs to help pay for necessities. One of his

¹⁸ Arthur Conan Doyle, *Memories and Adventures* (Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1924), 13.

¹⁹ William Kalush and Larry Sloman, *The Secret Life of Houdini: The Making of America’s First Superhero* (New York: Atria Books, 2006), 336.

jobs was as an apprentice locksmith. Enthralled by a lock's mechanisms, Houdini studied carefully and precisely how each one worked. He also dabbled in magic and by age nineteen, Houdini was performing with his friend Jacob Hyman in his first magic act called "The Brothers Houdini." The act only lasted until 1894 when Harry married Wilhelmina Beatrice Rahner, Bess, after a three-week courtship. Bess was also a stage performer and when she married Houdini, she became his theater partner.²⁰

In their early career together, the Houdinis mostly played dime museums and circuses, traveling throughout the country. Their famed trick "Metamorphosis" was one of the top headliners on most promotional posters. Houdini performed many of the standard magic tricks at the beginning of his career, but he realized that a crowd was more mesmerized by the suspense of an escape or unusual spectacle than the sleight of hand in a card trick. Houdini put his theory to the test when he and Bess became Vaudeville mediums. When the show would arrive in a new place, Houdini would investigate the town and any interesting stories that seemed to be common knowledge. Once the Houdinis were on stage, Madame Houdini would fall into a trance and Harry would question her about something only the citizens of the town would supposedly know. Spiritualism grew to be a popular topic of conversation, so the Houdinis' appeal to the new phenomenon only sparked a larger audience and more experience for the couple.²¹

Harry Houdini's spiritual interests were ignited long before he staged fake séances and mind reading demonstrations. From early on, Houdini was influenced by his father's religious teachings, and he was encouraged to believe in God and an afterlife.

²⁰ Kenneth Silverman, *Houdini!!!: The Career of Erich Weiss* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1996), 3,7, 8-10.

²¹ Kalush and Sloman, *The Secret Life of Harry Houdini*, 27, 33, 60.

When Mayer Samuel died, Houdini was grieved and went to numerous séances to attempt communication. With little result, Houdini's interest waned until he came across the Vaudeville spiritualist acts of the Davenport Brothers. The allure of Spiritualism once again gripped Houdini and he began reading fervently about the religion and questioning the practices. He read *Revelations of a Spirit Medium* and recognized all the tricks and methods mediums used during their sittings.²² Later, Houdini would repeat multiple times in books, articles, and magazines that he was willing to accept Spiritualism as truth if he could find a legitimate medium who proved to be honest.²³ He claimed to always scrutinize with an open mind.²⁴

Houdini's research provided more techniques for his shows and he was able to successfully duplicate and create new phenomena on stage. As curiosity in Spiritualism intensified, Houdini realized that many people were accepting the false marvels and believing in fraudulent mediums. His personal conviction changed some of his Vaudeville performances from spiritualist medium to spiritualist debunker.²⁵ After a brief tour in America, Houdini went to Europe and spent nearly five years demonstrating his escapes and investigating Spiritualism.

After his last tour in Europe, Houdini considered retiring from the pressures of showmanship and exhausting travels. The Houdinis bought a twenty-five thousand dollar house in Manhattan and invited his mother to live in the spacious house; however, Houdini's break was brief. Returning to the United States in 1905 made Houdini a

²² Kalush and Sloman, *The Secret Life of Houdini*, 52-54.

²³ "A Magician Who Mistrusts 'Spirits' and All Their Works," June 3, 1922, *The Literary Digest*, Harry Houdini Scrapbook, Microfilm, Library of Congress, Leone Cass Baer, "Famous Magician Unable to Accept Belief of Conan Doyle—Pacts with Friends Fail to Bring Back Dead," March 12, 1923, *Oregonian*, Harry Houdini Scrapbook, Microfilm, Library of Congress, Houdini, *A Magician Among the Spirits*, xii.

²⁴ Houdini, *Houdini On Magic*, 123.

²⁵ Houdini, *A Magician Among the Spirits*, xi.

Vaudeville sensation. B.F. Keith, the famed Vaudeville manager, invited Houdini on a three-year tour of the United States. People quickly learned the face and name of the European sensation and since his last American tour, Houdini mastered the ability to capture and hold an audience's attention.²⁶ What made Houdini's act more memorable and desired were his challenges to the audience. A few of Houdini's signature tricks were escaping handcuffs, manacles, and straitjackets that were brought by the audience or members of the police force. A challenge was set and Houdini had to break from the cuffs or admit defeat. Houdini received other tests from the public such as escaping from enormous milk cans, piano crates, giant manila envelopes, baskets, mail bags, a man-sized football, automobile chains, a large incandescent bulb, being bricked into a house, and an iron coffin. Houdini only accepted the challenges that he knew he could win and still remain alive.²⁷

By 1910, Houdini was one of Keith's biggest Vaudeville performers. The magician's name graced theatre marquees, playbills, posters, and his picture was one of the most widely seen in newspapers and magazines. On a brief tour in Australia, Houdini found himself floating in the Yarra River after jumping off the Queens Bridge in front of twenty thousand people. After several nights on stage, Houdini turned his attention to the small plane he brought with him on his voyage. On March 18, 1910, Harry Houdini became the first man to successfully fly a plane in Australia, sustaining a flight of three and half minutes.²⁸ After Houdini's flight, he commented that if people did not remember

²⁶ Silverman, *Houdini!!!*, 107-111.

²⁷ Houdini, *Houdini on Magic*, 109, 117, Silverman, *Houdini!!!*, 119-120.

²⁸ Silverman, *Houdini!!!*, 143, 146-147.

any of his other tricks, at least he would be remembered as the first man to fly in Australia.²⁹

Houdini returned to the United States for another brief tour and to perfect some of his most famous escapes. Since the escape artist was still famous in Europe, he made several trips across the Atlantic to introduce new stunts and maintain his popularity. As a way to keep audiences intrigued and mystified, Houdini worked fervently to create new tricks and diversions. In 1912, he revealed his Water Torture Cell for the first time in Berlin, Germany.³⁰ Such an attempt to defy the contraption had never been seen on a European or American stage. It was a huge success for Houdini and his career. Also around the same time, Houdini was working on establishing his own society. He had been a member of the Society for American Magicians, but now he started the Magicians Club for other showman like himself.³¹ Houdini's Vaudeville success and fame was increasing both in America's and abroad, but the death of his mother in 1913 caused him to focus more on America's fascination with Spiritualism.³²

By 1916, Houdini was steadily moving away from Vaudeville, booking fewer tours, and spending more time on his other interests. He began working on his first film, *The Master Mystery*, which grossed two hundred and twenty-five thousand dollars. After his success, the new film star created his own film company, the Film Development

²⁹ Kalush and Sloman, *The Secret Life of Houdini*, 246-258.

³⁰ Houdini, *Houdini on Magic*, 114. Silverman, *Houdini!!!*, 166-167. The Water Torture Cell was one of Houdini's most famous escapes. A large glass box was placed on stage and filled with water. Houdini was then strapped by his ankles to the lid of the box and lowered by a crane upside down very carefully so the performers ankles would not break. He had to successfully release his ankles from the chains and emerge from the case without the aid of anyone. The glass cell cost over ten thousand dollars to make and Houdini always carried an extra panel of glass if one broke because of water temperature.

³¹ Silverman, *Houdini!!!*, 168.

³² After his mother's death, Houdini cancelled all his immediate engagements and mourned for months. Houdini was very devoted to his mother and he was devastated when she passed way. For a time his stage performances suffered because of his depression. He booked a three-year tour of Europe as a means of escape from the grief.

Corporation, as another way to spread his fame. His company produced *The Grim Game* and *Terror Island* which were given glowing reviews and staggering profits. Houdini also used his time away from Vaudeville to write and research. From 1906 to 1926, Houdini published almost a dozen books on magic, trickery, and Spiritualism. Many of his books exposed fraudulent magicians, Vaudeville performers, spiritualists, and mediums. When Houdini decided to step away from the Vaudeville stage, he spent considerable time in his study investigating Spiritual séances, psychical research, and occult phenomena.³³

Houdini and Conan Doyle began their friendship when Houdini was performing at the Hippodrome in Brighton, England.³⁴ After publishing *The Unmaking of Robert-Houdin*, Houdini sent a copy of his book to the famed British author. Houdini wanted Conan Doyle's opinion on the piece, and after a brief dispute over the Davenport Brothers; the two men began a casual correspondence.³⁵ Conan Doyle was recognized as a fervent spiritualist and he was a spearhead for the movement in England, while Houdini was beginning his crusade against false mediums in America. The odd friendship sparked competition, additional research, and rival lecture tours that further informed a curious American public about the possible "dangers" or likely comfort Spiritualism offered.³⁶

Fame and popularity guided the majority of Arthur Conan Doyle and Harry Houdini's lives as showmen. From early on, both men channeled their talents into successful careers. Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes stories and Houdini's Vaudeville

³³ Silverman, *Houdini!!!*, 238, 245.

³⁴ Houdini, *A Magician Among the Spirits*, 139.

³⁵ Silverman, *Houdini!!!*, 252-253. In their first few correspondences, the two men argued over the legitimacy of the Davenport brothers as legitimate mediums. Sir Arthur argued that the brothers were never exposed, but Houdini stated that the brothers did not claim to be Spiritualists. Houdini, *A Magician Among the Spirits*, 148-149. Houdini and Conan Doyle would exchange hundreds of letters over the course of their three-year friendship.

³⁶ Bernard M.L. Ernst and Hereward Carrington, *Houdini and Conan Doyle: The Story of a Strange Friendship* (1933 reprint, New York: Benjamin Blom, Inc., 1972), 15.

acts provided the necessary recognition for their later ambitions and experiments on tour. Both men captivated audiences and demonstrated their knowledge and passion for popular entertainment and serious scholarship. American society was swept up in the tricks and magic of Spiritualism and Houdini and Conan Doyle were at the forefront battling for recognition and truth.

Chapter Three

Missionary Zeal Against the Persistent Press: The First Lecture Tour of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle

“Until Thursday is over I shall be in a turmoil,” wrote Sir Arthur Conan Doyle after his first lecture on tour in the United States in 1922, “Then, when I can breathe, I hope to see you—your normal self, not in a tank or hanging by one toe from a skyscraper.” The famous author was writing to popular magician, Harry Houdini. The two men had become fast friends after respectfully debating Modern Spiritualism in the press and in personal letters. When the Doyle family traveled to America for the lecture tour, Houdini opened his home as a place for them to stay, as well as a place where the two friendly adversaries could deliberate. During one such visit, Houdini wished to try a new illusion on his visiting guest. Houdini brought out an ordinary slate with two holes bored in two of the corners. A wire had been tied in the holes and Conan Doyle hung the slate by two metal holes to insure that Houdini had not tampered with the materials. Houdini produced four cork balls and an inkwell filled with white ink. He had Conan Doyle inspect the balls and he told him to select one from the four. Houdini then cut the ball in half to reveal that the ball was indeed, solid cork. Another ball was placed in the white ink where it was coated then put aside. “Have you a piece of paper in your pocket upon which you can write something?” Houdini asked his friend. Conan Doyle confirmed that he did and Houdini asked him to walk out of the house, as far as he wanted, and for him to write a sentence on the piece of paper, then return it to his pocket. The writer consented and left the house. Houdini had another friend stay with him to reassure Conan Doyle that Houdini would not leave the house. After walking three blocks and writing, “Mene, mene, teckel, upharsin,” he returned to the house. Houdini asked him to pick up

the ink ball with a spoon and to hold it to the suspended slate. The cork ball stuck without any aid and proceeded to roll across the surface of the slate, writing the exact message that Conan Doyle had written on his paper. “I beg you, Sir Arthur, do not jump to the conclusion that certain things you see are necessarily ‘supernatural,’ or the work of ‘spirits,’ just because you cannot explain them,” Houdini said. Bewildered, Conan Doyle would conclude later that the only way Houdini could have accomplished the trick was through the work of psychic aid.¹

During private meetings and public performances, Houdini and Conan Doyle remained steadfast to their opinions and convictions regarding Spiritualism. Although Conan Doyle witnessed and participated in many of Houdini’s experiments, he maintained a fierce loyalty to psychic phenomena as an answer to all queries he could not explain. Though both men were careful never to reveal any doubt in their beliefs, each man was willing to claim an open mind to counter any challenges to their avid causes. The two showmen were tested as the popularity of Spiritualism grew in the increasing curiosity of the public. Conan Doyle and Houdini proceeded to give two lecture tours in the 1920s each on their findings and arguments on psychical research, materialism, and Spiritualism. The press coverage of the tours provided both lecturers with the opinions of the American public on the presentations and also a means to gauge the interest in spiritual activity.²

In 1922 Conan Doyle came to America to give a series of lectures on Spiritualism because of the amplified amount of press coverage the religion was receiving and for a

¹ Bernard M.L. Ernst and Hereward Carrington, *Houdini and Conan Doyle: The Story of a Strange Friendship* (1933 reprint, New York: Benjamin Blom, Inc., 1972), 247-249.

² Arthur Conan Doyle, *Our American Adventure*, (New York: George H. Doran Company, 1923), 28-30. Kenneth Silverman, *Houdini!!!: The Career of Erich Weiss* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1996), 298-299.

chance to tell the truth about what he believed. “Anyone who has a great truth to tell must come to America,” Conan Doyle relayed to the press, “In no other country can so many intelligent and thoughtful people be found.”³ The Doyle family arrived to find a crowd of reporters waiting on the docks to greet them on April 9, 1922. The lecture tour was scheduled to last from April to early June, and Conan Doyle was booked for twenty-five lectures in eight cities. Prior to the visit, many newspapers across the United States advertised Conan Doyle’s appearance on the advice of his New York manager, Lee Keedick. “You can tell America,” Sir Arthur told reporters before his arrival, “That I am sternly serious. I am coming over, not in a commercial or otherwise interested frame of mind, but merely to tell the truth of spiritualism.”⁴ When reporters met Conan Doyle, he was bombarded with questions about his future lectures and his work as a writer. Regarding his tours, Sir Arthur said that he proposed, “to make a raid on American skepticism” to “raid church and laity alike.”⁵ The famous writer was even willing to renounce his creation of Sherlock Holmes as a demonstration of his faith. The novels were based on physical materialism and Conan Doyle was readily prepared to show the truth about material deception to prove his faith. Emphasizing the fiction behind Sherlock Holmes, Conan Doyle noted to the press that he appreciated the analytical mysteries, but he had “learned the truth, and Sherlock Holmes, however interesting and valuable as a friend,” had no place in the writer’s life.⁶

Many reporters were curious as to what the lectures would cover during Conan Doyle’s “raid” on American religion. Always eager to relate his beliefs and predictions,

³ “Conan Doyle Here to Speak on Spiritualism,” *Fort Worth Star Telegram*, April 10, 1922.

⁴ “Famous British Arthur Arrives in America Today to Lecture on Latest Hobby of Spiritualism,” *Tucson Daily Citizen*, April 9, 1922.

⁵ “Death Promotion to Happier Plane Says Conan Doyle,” *Anaconda Standard*, April 10, 1922.

⁶ “Death Promotion to Happier Plane.”

Sir Arthur was quick to explain that Spiritualism was a “greater religion than anything we have ever known. Fifty years from today this world is going to be a spiritual world in which leaders are going to laugh at our puny attempts to fathom the future.” He also corresponded that simplified Spiritualism was “merely a great white truth of the Bible and religion. It is pristine purely of thought and action combined.”⁷ One question that weighed on many reporters’ minds was the thought of heaven and hell. Conan Doyle, without revealing too much of his intended lectures, said that men do not go to hell, but “a sort of hospital that is gray and a very unhappy unpleasant sort of place.” Another reoccurring question was about the profits of the lecture tour. Doyle made it clear that the lectures would not be given for profit and all of the proceeds would be donated to the cause.⁸

Sir Arthur’s first appearance was scheduled in New York at Carnegie Hall on April 12, 1922.⁹ Although the United States tour had been booked before he left on his tour of Australia, numerous organizations clamored for the spiritualist’s attention.¹⁰ Lee Keedick, who oversaw the northern part of Conan Doyle’s tour, continuously disputed with venues and groups that wanted the lecture tour to make unscheduled stops. The First Spiritual Church in Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania, made significant efforts to persuade Keedick to bring the tour to Wilkes-Barre after the New York lectures. Unfortunately for the spiritualist church, Keedick kept a tight schedule and many other organizations received the same reply. The author’s popularity and fame grew as more people read the

⁷ “Sir Arthur Conan Doyle in New York,” *The Montgomery Advertiser*, April 10, 1922.

⁸ “Sir Arthur Conan Doyle Makes ‘Raid’ on American Skepticism,” *The Charlotte Observer*, April 10, 1922.

⁹ Friends, colleagues, and members of the press often referred to Conan Doyle as simply “Sir Arthur.”

¹⁰ Conan Doyle’s tours were extremely popular and generally booked months and even up to a year in advance. When Keedick first released the news of Conan Doyle’s tour spiritualist churches, theatres, and lecture halls attempted to gain an audience with the author.

generally favorable news coverage of the tour so the demand for more lectures increased as the tour progressed.¹¹

A lecture tour given in America was a relatively new idea, at least in the magnitude that Conan Doyle presented. Sir Oliver Lodge had previously lectured on the scientific connections within psychical research and Spiritualism, and he did have comparative success, but not on the same scale as Conan Doyle's tours and he was not as popular. Since Lee Keedick booked more than one lecture in each city, Sir Arthur prepared two different lectures for the cities where he had multiple bookings. The first lecture series was entitled "The Proofs of Immortality" and the second "Recent Psychic Evidence." The first run of lectures focused on the beliefs and practices of Spiritualism and the second concentrated on psychical research and spirit photography.¹²

Since the experienced public spokesmen had delivered his lecture to people all over the world, he generally used the same framework for each lecture. When he first arrived, newspapers advertised his lectures consisting of his personal experience with psychic phenomena and his own research into published works on the history and religion of Spiritualism.¹³ Some of the most publicized parts of his lecture were the references to his knowledge of Reverend G. Vale Owen's *The Life Beyond the Veil*, the writings of Swedish philosopher, Emmanuel Swedenborg, and Conan Doyle's own Spiritualist works, *The New Revelation*, *The Vital Message*, and *The Wanderings of a Spiritualist*.¹⁴

¹¹ "Trying to Secure Lecture Here By Sir Conan Doyle," *Wilkes-Barre Times Leader*, April 10, 1922.

¹² "Conan Doyle to Reach Philadelphia Today," *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, April 19, 1922.

¹³ "Trying to Secure Lecture Here By Sir Conan Doyle."

¹⁴ "Book Corner About Writers and New Volumes," *Albuquerque Morning Journal*, April 24, 1922. "Advertisement for Lecture Tour and *New Revelation*," *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, April 16, 1922.

The structure of each lecture was generally the same in each city. First, Conan Doyle described the essence of heaven, and mesmerized the crowd with tales of spirits evading the grave. As the audience remained hushed, the lecturer described a mystical phenomenon that was only possible through spiritual guidance. Evidence determined by well-known scientists provided listening skeptics with proof of life beyond the physical world. After recalling his own glimpse into spiritualist teachings, Sir Arthur illustrated countless encounters he had with his son, Kingsley, around a séance table.¹⁵ After finishing a lecture, crowds and reporters mobbed Conan Doyle because he left audiences clamoring for their questions to be answered.

For the first few lectures, Sir Arthur had spectators and the press following him to his dressing room. The information presented in the lectures was not always fully explained and often, audience members were left with unanswered questions. “The most tiring thing of the whole evening was the crowd who flocked into the dressing-room before I could escape,” Conan Doyle noted. “I was very hot and exhausted,” the lecturer exasperatedly reported, “but could not get away from a number of good but rather inconsiderate people who had psychic difficulties which might have been deferred to a later date.”¹⁶ Other viewers sought autographs and some people came to see Conan Doyle to satisfy their curiosity. After such incidences, Conan Doyle began to shorten his lectures to allow for a question and answer session.

Often while Conan Doyle had time off from his busy lecture circuit, he and his family would attend séances lead by prominent mediums. Usually a lecture lasted an hour to an hour and forty-five minutes, during which Sir Arthur gave his well-rehearsed

¹⁵ Conan Doyle, *Our American Adventure*, 26-30.

¹⁶ Conan Doyle, *Our American Adventure*, 30.

speech on Spiritualism. The remainder of the time was devoted to explaining his recent experiences with local mediums and answering questions and challenges. One of the first points the lecturer made clear was the vision of heaven. According to the *Kansas City Star*, Sir Arthur promptly explained that heaven was “inhabited by dogs, cows and sheep, and contains buildings.” To many delighted and surprised audience members, heaven was a place where men “died at 80 [and] became 30” and “all women became beautiful.”¹⁷ Yet he also asserted that people would have the same bodies in the spirit world that they possessed in the physical world. This vital information came to Sir Arthur through the communication with his son, Kingsley Conan Doyle, during many séances since his son’s death in World War One.¹⁸

While describing his beliefs and theories, Sir Arthur would also explain the reason why Spiritualism was true and based on factual evidence. One of the authorities of Spiritualism is the New Testament because it “is saturated with spiritualism from cover to cover.” Only some of the lecture focused on theology because Sir Arthur believed it was “from the devil and not from Christ.”¹⁹ The *Philadelphia Inquirer* reported that Conan Doyle urged churches to continue preaching Spiritualism, a reoccurring theme which dominated the lectures. He observed: “Churches all teach Spiritualism, but thus far have refused to acknowledge the possibilities of communication between the spiritual and physical world.” The justification for his claim was based on the belief in life after death.²⁰ According to Conan Doyle, mainstream churches and theologians prosecuted

¹⁷ “He Gets the ‘News’ Direct: Conan Doyle’s Son Keeps Him Advised on Events in Heaven,” *Kansas City Star*, April 19, 1922.

¹⁸ “Tells of Heaven As Pictured in Spirit Messages,” *Wilkes-Barre Times Leader*, April 21, 1922.

¹⁹ “He Gets the ‘News’ Direct.”

²⁰ “Doyle Sees Human and Spirit Worlds Connected Up Soon,” *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, April 20, 1922.

sinner too harshly and condemned people to hell.²¹ Spiritualism offered a chance of immortality for the soul and no one was condemned.

Audiences were also given the opportunity to hear about other key elements evident in séances and psychical research. Conan Doyle usually gave a brief explanation of ectoplasm and a medium's ability to feel the transmission from his or her consciousness to another person.²² Devils were also seen traipsing through séance rooms and Sir Arthur suggested that there were many devils and "mischievous spirits" that were always lurking around. While exhibiting his spirit photographs, he stated that the other side had a "sizable population of devils," who are "undeveloped human spirits" who are "still earth bound to a great degree and have made no improvements in their spiritual selves since death."²³ Another connection Conan Doyle stressed was the ability to contact the spirit world through radio waves. As this new and seemingly unexplainable technology emerged, the possibility of linking the spirit and physical world appeared not only probable, but also convincing.²⁴

From the first lecture, the press continuously covered Conan Doyle's addresses. Lee Keedick and T. Arthur Smith, the tour's Mid-Atlantic manager, advertised in many newspapers in advance of the lecture.²⁵ As the tours continued, publicity and popularity grew and more people joined the already overcrowded audiences. Many news and opinion columns would broadcast the next engagement along with the previous lecture's popularity by noting a sold out performance or a theatre manager turning spectators

²¹ "Heaven According to Doyle," *Morning Oregonian*, April 30, 1922.

²² "Doyle Shows Photo of Spiritualist Haze," *Trenton Evening News*, April 22, 1922.

²³ "New York Letter," *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, May 8, 1922.

²⁴ "Timely Views of World Topics: 'We'll Talk to Dead with Radio' Asserts Doyle," *Grand Forks Herald*, May 13, 1922.

²⁵ "Will Hear Conan Doyle Lecture in Washington," *The Baltimore American*, April 23, 1922.

away.²⁶ “Since his arrival in American several weeks ago,” *The Philadelphia Inquirer* reported, “he has appeared before thousands attracted by these startling theories of spirit communication and life after death.”²⁷ Other newspapers would observe popular opinion by recording how the audience responded to a lecture. *The Philadelphia Inquirer* remarked that Sir Arthur’s views have “aroused considerable criticism, both favorable and adverse, among persons interested in the theory of spirit communication.”²⁸

Lectures were also admired because of the venue and location. Conan Doyle’s tour covered eight cities: New York, Boston, Washington, D.C., Philadelphia, New Haven, Buffalo, Detroit, and Chicago. Lee Keedick and T. Arthur Smith were able to secure well-known and impressive venues with large halls and thousands of available seats. Sir Arthur lectured at Carnegie Hall, the Lyric Opera House, National Theatre in Washington, D.C., the Academy of Music in Philadelphia, Yale University, and even the American Club of Magicians, to list only a few.²⁹ These well-respected institutions provided further credibility for Conan Doyle’s tour.

As Conan Doyle continued his tour and more spectators joined the crowded audiences, he began to receive more challenges from lecture attendees, and also from the press. Coverage of the tours revealed the popularity of the lectures and although the criticism was not always positive, the interest in the topic suggested that the American public was willing to entertain the idea of Spiritualism. People who attended the lectures came from laymen and scholarly backgrounds and not all challengers were experienced

²⁶ “Conan Doyle to Lecture Here,” *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, April 16, 1922.

²⁷ “Doyle Lectures Today,” *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, May 2, 1922.

²⁸ “Conan Doyle to Reach Philadelphia Today,” *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, April 19, 1922.

²⁹ “Conan Doyle to Lecture Here,” “Advertisement for Lecture Tour and *New Revelation*,” “Will Hear Conan Doyle,” *The Baltimore American*, April 30, 1922, “Will Hear Conan Doyle Lecture in Washington,” “Pretty Artiste Discusses Her Role,” *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, April 23, 1922, Conan Doyle, *Our American Adventure*, 149.

spiritualists. Most people were simply curious. Scientists, clergymen, mediums, reporters, magicians and skeptics submitted challenges to test Sir Arthur both on stage and in the press. Trials ranged from scientific experiments to mock séances, to simple questions of clarity. The lecturer gladly accepted most challenges and the public scrutinized every action and word for legitimacy.³⁰

Although some audience members showed hints of skepticism and the press often denounced his beliefs, Sir Arthur nonetheless demonstrated his knowledge and public speaking abilities through his mesmerizing showmanship. Known for his adventurous writings and bravery in war, the lecturer used his talents to captivate audiences. Even if a spectator left the theatre with skeptical unchanged beliefs, Conan Doyle had successfully grasped his attention with the same stories of courage and excitement. Though the lecture tour only spanned eight cities, reporters from the East to the West Coast reported on the positive publicity and the negative reactions. Above all, newspapers were willing to track the tour because of the speaker's commanding presence and his overwhelming popularity as an entertainer and mystic. Sir Arthur's keen showmanship provided positive opinions, but it also caused more people to question him.

Some of Conan Doyle's most famous challenges were highly publicized and widely followed. Joseph F. Rinn, a.k.a the "ghost breaker" and the president of the Society of American Magicians, challenged Sir Arthur to a public debate in which Rinn would create phenomena that Conan Doyle believed to be only produced by medium. The

³⁰ Kelvin I. Jones, *Conan Doyle and the Spirits: The Spiritualist Career of Arthur Conan Doyle* (Wellingborough, Northamptonshire, England, 1989), 176-188.

sum of five thousand dollars was wagered against the spiritualist but the challenge was never accepted.³¹

Other challenges came from religious officials and clergymen who either questioned Sir Arthur directly or began another religious tour to counter the popular lectures. Dr. George Wood Anderson, of the United Gospel Crusade Tabernacle, praised the negative press that was reported after some of the lectures. Anderson believed that Conan Doyle's words were only "senseless prattle" and his own lecture "Dreams and Ghosts" would counter the author's arguments. Encouraging the public and press to continue condemning the "spiritualistic tricks," Anderson accused Sir Arthur of insulting the public's judgment by spreading foolishness.³² Another test came from Reverend M. R. Coon, pastor of a Seventh Day Adventist Church, who challenged Conan Doyle's reference to Biblical teaching. "The Bible teaches there is no truth of suffering in heaven," Coon argued for *The Lexington Herald*, and "it also teaches that man does not continue to live after death, but he remains dead...."³³ Clergymen even challenged the author's written work on psychical phenomena and spiritual teachings. Dr. William T. McElveen, pastor of First Congregational Church, questioned *The Wanderings of a Spiritualist* because of its juvenile and immature content.³⁴ Conan Doyle occasionally answered challenges in the papers, or he would address them directly on stage in the next lecture.

³¹ "One Thing and Another: A Brick and New York; Lady Astor's Bill; Will Sir Arthur Accept," *Cleveland Plain Dealer*, April 19, 1922, "Arthur Conan Doyle Challenged to Showdown by 'Ghost Breaker;' Says He Can Produce Equal Effects," *The Lexington Herald*, April 24, 1922.

³² "Crusader Attacks Sir A. Conan Doyle," *Morning Oregonian*, April 20, 1922.

³³ "Attacks Doyle's Claims," *The Lexington Herald*, April 24, 1922.

³⁴ "Doyle's Book Criticised," *Morning Oregonian*, June 5, 1922.

Scientists also questioned the lecturer's viewpoints when examining the various pictures shown by Conan Doyle during his tour. Dr. C. E. Seashore, a psychologist of the National Academy of Sciences, attended one of the lectures and determined that the photographs were "the result of trickery." Furthermore, Seashore established that the lectures were having "a dangerous effect on simple-minded people" who were present during the speeches. Although the negative press was not encouraging for Sir Arthur, the report gives insight into who attended some of his lectures and the opinion of a leading member of the scientific community.³⁵

Spiritualists also recognized Conan Doyle's lectures as a way to test his knowledge and to further their own understanding of the religion. Some spiritualists were skeptical of the lectures because many of Sir Arthur's claims did not correspond to all spiritualist tradition. J. Ross Deamude, a practitioner of Spiritualism for twenty years, believed that Conan Doyle was not prepared "to demonstrate that phenomena attributed to spirits" could be "explained by the working of the subconscious mind and magic." Deamude challenged the lecturer by telegram and attempted to have his questions answered during the lecture but Sir Arthur never responded.³⁶

One of the most important aspects of the lecture tours was the attention of the American public through the press. Reaction to the lecture series gauged the level of interest in Spiritualism, whether through challenges, or simple editorial remarks. The press was present at each lecture and although Conan Doyle only made it as far south as Washington, D.C. and as far west as Chicago, newspapers all across the United States printed numerous articles on the lectures on a weekly, and often times daily basis. The

³⁵ "A. Conan Doyle's Proofs of Spirit Communication 'The Result of Trickery,'" *The Charlotte Observer*, May 5, 1922.

³⁶ "Seeks Debate Date with Spiritualist Doyle," *Cleveland Plain Dealer*, May 3, 1922.

remarks were both positive and negative as letters poured in from the public and newspapers took their own stand on either side of Conan Doyle's beliefs. The lecture tours demonstrated a resurgence of spiritual belief and created uproar as an overwhelming interest surfaced in the public press.

The press served as a channel for spreading the public's opinions of Spiritualism. Although reporters were not always objective, articles provided varying opinions of Sir Arthur's lectures. After the first lecture in New York, the press was quick to evaluate what was said and audience reactions. Judging from viewers' interaction, there was "not perhaps as much skepticism with reference to the immortality of the soul as the irreligious think...but there is a growing tendency to demand a scientific explanation for every reasonably proven fact." Yet, the *Morning Oregonian* warned that Conan Doyle had "before him a task of greater magnitude" to prove to the people that his theories were plausible.³⁷ Often, newspapers retold specific details that mentioned the audience's direct response to an action or statement made during the lecture. "The attitude of the audience toward the [spirit] pictures was curious," a reporter in New York, noted, "There was a manifestly sympathetic echo to the applause which frequently greeted some unusually weird or pathetic picture of the ectoplasmic projections."³⁸

Newspapers generally attempted to be objective when printing articles about the lecture tours, and frequently printed only the reactions of the public. Other newspapers were more inclined to print opinions that rivaled or supported public interest. Some were even taken aback by the successful lecture presented. *The Philadelphia Inquirer* noted that New York had "never been stirred" like it had after Conan Doyle's lecture, and it

³⁷"Life after Death," *Morning Oregonian*, April 11, 1922.

³⁸"Dead Materialized in Spirit Pictures," *Morning Oregonian*, May 4, 1922.

was predicted that “he will make as deep an impression” on Philadelphia during his stop there.³⁹ *The Baltimore American* suggested that a “‘rapt audience’ hung upon his words, and no wonder what with the encouragement the speaker ladled out by the gallon!”⁴⁰

The positive reports deemed Sir Arthur’s efforts admirable and although some of his theories were questionable, the lectures were at least entertaining for the audience and demonstrated his knowledge. The *Anaconda Standard* in Montana, praised Conan Doyle for being “honest in his convictions and sincerely desirous of placing before all the people actual evidence of the continued existence of human personalities after death.”⁴¹ Reporters wrote that the lectures were more successful than Sir Oliver Lodge’s: “There was nothing Puckish about the spirits that he plucked out of the ether and sent skidding all over eternity,” which explained why “Sir Oliver went away from America a good deal less popular than when he came.” Although Sir Arthur did not convince everyone of his beliefs, there was “no doubt,” that he was “amply qualified as a popular lecturer.”⁴²

When some newspapers would print pessimistic articles or editorials, others would attempt to report on the cautiousness and credibility Sir Arthur had as a religious scholar. Critics and skeptics accused the lecturer of convening with fraudulent mediums and believing in anything produced during a séance. *The Kansas City Star*, however, tried to make it clear that no one could “put anything from the spirit world over on Sir Arthur...he has become wary. He knows there are unscrupulous persons who would fool him if they could.”⁴³ Although Conan Doyle was fooled by a few fakes, some reporters

³⁹ “Conan Doyle to Speak Here on Immortality,” *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, April 16, 1922.

⁴⁰ “A Daniel of Lecturer,” *The Baltimore American*, April 20, 1922.

⁴¹ “For a Ghost Laboratory,” *Anaconda Standard*, April 16, 1922.

⁴² “A Daniel of a Lecturer!”

⁴³ “Doyle Insists on Proof,” *The Kansas City Star*, May 2, 1922.

were generous in their articles. Sir Arthur's theories were often too unbelievable for most people to comprehend, but newspapers attempted to be courteous toward his lectures.

Negative reports of the tour were just as abundant and some newspapers even changed sides depending on the success of a lecture. *The Philadelphia Inquirer* usually posted optimistic articles, but it would also never reject an editorial comment from the public. "The more Conan Doyle talks," one critic observed, "the further we become convinced in our preoccupation that of recent years he has developed his imagination at the expense of common sense."⁴⁴ Additional negative comments were printed in *The Montgomery Advertiser* stating that the writer was foolish for trading his thrilling and exciting stories for spiritual nonsense. Sir Arthur had his "values badly mixed," because Sherlock Holmes's adventures were "more rational than the things the spirits" did.⁴⁵ Despite "large audiences," a spiritual skeptic was quoted in *The Montgomery Advertiser*: "We do not fancy the particular heaven which the creator of Sherlock Holmes is portraying for American audiences."⁴⁶ Another critical remark was published in the *Albuquerque Morning Journal* as a representation of public speculation; "One feels an uneasy suspicion that Sir Arthur has missed something of the highest importance in his geography of the hereafter. No doubt his heaven is easy to reach, but is he so sure it is really Heaven?"⁴⁷

Similar disapproving attitudes were recorded after men and women began committing suicide or murder to achieve a place in the newly popular spiritual world. *The Daily Herald* in Biloxi, Mississippi, gave an account of a man in Toronto, Canada, who

⁴⁴ "Editorial Comment," *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, April 21, 1922.

⁴⁵ "Letters to the Editor," *The Montgomery Advertiser*, April 21, 1922.

⁴⁶ "Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's Spiritualism," *The Montgomery Advertiser*, April 23, 1922.

⁴⁷ "Editorial of the Day: Conan Doyle's Hereafter," *Albuquerque Morning Journal*, April 28, 1922.

killed himself after reading about Sir Arthur's lectures in the newspapers. "Death is beautiful and without any sense of pain," Conan Doyle stated in a newspaper clipping found near the body of Percy Brown. "I am 79 and blind or very nearly so, and if this clipping is true," the deceased's note read, "why should I linger here."⁴⁸ The press used the negative publicity against the lectures and looked for other events that further confirmed the public's disillusionment with Sir Arthur. In New York a porter stabbed his wife in the head because he mistakenly believed her to be a ghost. Frank Alesl's counsel to the court that his client "had been reading accounts of lectures by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, and that Alesl's mental condition was such that he should not be allowed at large."⁴⁹ Sir Arthur was never given the opportunity to comment.

Newspapers also publicized opposing lecture tours to stir up controversy and show the public's changing opinion. *The Philadelphia Inquirer* ran an advertisement for a lecture tour that immediately followed Conan Doyle's visit to the city of brotherly love, given by Reverend Walter F. McMillan, a pastor at a local Presbyterian Church. The announcement read, "because of the interest shown in the recent lecture tour of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle," a lecture series will be given "to deal with the history of spiritualism, its message, and the sources of its phenomena, in the light of Divine revelation."⁵⁰ To explain a different approach to Spiritualism, many local ministers lectured to their congregations. As interest in Conan Doyle's lectures increased, preachers believed their parishioners needed to be told the truth before they wandered from their faith.

⁴⁸ "Reads Conan Doyle Lecture; Kills Self," *The Daily Herald*, Biloxi, Mississippi, April 26, 1922.

⁴⁹ "Porter Who Had Read Accounts of Doyle's Lectures Stabs Wife," *Albuquerque Morning Journal*, April 29, 1922.

⁵⁰ "Pulpit and Pew," *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, April 22, 1922.

Newspapers also made suggestions for Conan Doyle's tour, whether visiting other cities or states. The *Anaconda Standard* published an article about the "true ghost belt of America" and recommended visiting Maryland and Virginia to find a multitude of spiritual beings, more so than in the North. "Curious it is that notwithstanding the large colored population of the ghost-infested South," reported the *Standard*, "the ghosts are all white, both in face and raiment." Sir Arthur was asked, "Are the spirits of the negroes dyed white immediately after death or what?" As an affirmative response to the lectures, the newspaper commends Sir Arthur for being a "polished English gentleman, one who by his broad culture and scholarly attainments has achieved a deserved place among the nobility and gentry" in Southern ghost society.⁵¹

The press avidly worked to cover the lectures and the audience reaction, but reporters also made an effort to keep the public interested in the subject and lectures by publishing satirical articles and comments. Readers contributed by writing their own humorous remarks and spreading curiosity about Sir Arthur and his lectures. "With all due respect," the *Anaconda Standard* requested, all "the public demands is ghosts that will quit their pussyfooting, come out into the open and lay all their cards down on the table." Some of the puns focused on Conan Doyle's ideas of life after death. "Sir Arthur Conan Doyle agrees, in his spiritualistic utterances, that marriages are made in Heaven, but states that there is no offspring from Celestial wedlock," *The Philadelphia Inquirer* reported, "It looks as if some heavenly body had stolen a march on the Birth Control League."⁵² Another paper also noted marriage in the spirit world, "Sir Arthur Conan

⁵¹ "The Great American Ghost Belt," *Anaconda Standard*, April 20, 1922.

⁵² "Through the Smoke Screen," *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, April 16, 1922.

Doyle says there are no divorces in the spirit world. Isn't there any next world for the lawyers at all?"⁵³

Portions of the lectures were devoted to what would be present in the hereafter. Sir Arthur avidly answered questions posed by audience members since most people were curious about the condition of heaven. As the lectures continued and the same material was repeated, newspaper reporters were always eager to hear the impromptu statements given by the speaker. Although most reports were accurate, words were twisted for reader amusement. "Sir Arthur Conan Doyle says there are no nagging women in heaven," one writer joked, "We can see where a good time will be had by all."⁵⁴ The lecturer was also noted as saying, "there are no flappers in the spirit world," and *The Kansas City Star* agreed, "The American Greeting is enough of a spiritualist to agree with him."⁵⁵ In one of his early lectures, Sir Arthur mentioned that dogs and many other animals would be present in heaven, just as on earth. Since dogs were allowed in the next world, *The Kansas City Star* perceived "a good time for all dogs if there are flowerbeds and overshoes."⁵⁶ The amusing comments aided the growing interest and provided a small insight into the lectures.

After two months of lecturing, the Doyle family packed to leave for Britain. Sir Arthur had a new project in the British temperance movement, but he promised to return for a second tour.⁵⁷ When the writer returned to his home, he penned *Our American Adventure* and had it published in October 1922 to commemorate his first lecture tour in

⁵³ "Starbeams," *The Kansas City Star*, April 20, 1922.

⁵⁴ "Sir Arthur Conan Doyle," *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, April 30, 1922.

⁵⁵ "Kansas Notes," *The Kansas City Star*, May 16, 1922.

⁵⁶ "Sir Arthur Conan Doyle; Kansas City Star," *Montgomery Advertiser*, May 11, 1922.

⁵⁷ "Sir Arthur Convert: Conan Doyle to Work for Prohibition in England," *The Bellingham Herald*, June 23, 1922.

America. Editions were printed and widely sold in the United States and many newspapers printed whole chapters and selections from the book to spread the news.⁵⁸

Whether newspapers accepted the idea of life after death or stretched the statements given during a speech, reporters were willing to appeal to the public's growing interest in Modern Spiritualism. Although challenged and mocked for his beliefs, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle came to America to spread the truth of psychical and spiritual phenomena. The American public did not completely alter its opinion of Spiritualism, but respect was shown for Sir Arthur's tenacity and zeal. The popular press found Conan Doyle's lectures interesting because they provided a wider based readership for scholars, churchmen, laymen, and skeptics alike. Newspapers provided a way to gauge the public's interest and revealed Sir Arthur's enthusiastic showmanship.

⁵⁸ "What Conan Doyle Thinks of Us," *Dallas Morning News*, October 12, 1922.

Chapter Four

Escape Artist Turned Educator: The Lecture Tours of Harry Houdini

“Houdini, if agreeable, Lady Doyle will give you a special séance,” Sir Arthur Conan Doyle said to the sunbathing magician. The Doyle family met the Houdinis at the Ambassador Hotel in Atlantic City in 1923 while both showmen were on tour and the two families were enjoying a day at the beach. Known for her automatic writing abilities, Lady Doyle suggested to her husband that a message may come through from Houdini’s late mother. Not wishing to offend the Doyles, Houdini agreed to sit in a shade-drawn room for a brief séance. Before the séance began however, Bess Houdini signaled to her husband that she had spoken to Lady Doyle about Houdini’s mother the day before so the magician was alert and suspicious. As the three sat down at a table, Lady Doyle was overcome with the spirit and her hand began jerking as she scrawled a message in English. “Oh my darling, thank God, thank God, at last I’m through—I’ve tried, oh so often—now I am happy,” the words of Houdini’s mother leaped onto the page, “Why of course, I want to talk to my boy—my own beloved boy—Friends, thank you, with all my heart for this.” The message continued for many pages and the Doyles believed the message was channeled directly from Cecilia Weiss. Houdini sat still reading the messages as the words formed on the page. When the séance was over Houdini noted that the message could not have come from his mother because, although his mother had lived in the United States for almost fifty years, she always spoke Hungarian and never learned to read or write in English. Without directly accusing Lady Doyle, Houdini dismissed the séance and left the disheartened and sour Doyles in their suite.¹

¹ A version of this account can be found in multiple sources: Harry Houdini, *A Magician Among the Spirits* (1924 reprint; Netherlands, Holland: Fredonia Books, 1972), 150-154, Bernard M. L. Ernst and

Sir Arthur Conan Doyle booked another American lecture tour in the spring of 1923. His previous tour ran for two months and he delivered twenty-five addresses along the east coast. Returning to continue his campaign for Spiritualism, Conan Doyle planned to speak in cities from New York to San Francisco and finish his tour by traveling through Canada.² He planned a forty-day “Western Tour” during which he would present one hundred speeches. The second tour was significantly larger as it covered cities spanning the entire United States. Harry Houdini was also giving his Orpheum tour at the same time and the two men’s paths often crossed in cities and in the press. Houdini’s tour mostly revealed his escape tricks and stunts, but he also laid the foundation for his official lecture tour by speaking about fraudulent mediums while on stage.³ Houdini and Conan Doyle were household names and their exploits were recorded often in newspapers, both men used their fame to their advantage as a way to promote their causes.⁴ However, at times Sir Arthur gained more publicity because the American public was fascinated with a foreign speaker and valued the limited time of the tour.

Through decades of sensationalized publicity, Houdini became a popular public figure in the eyes of gasping crowds and eager reporters. Since the beginning of his career, Houdini, like most vaudevillians, craved the headlines in newspapers and the noise of an excited audience. Performing on stage in front of thousands of cheering admirers challenged Houdini to use his gift of showmanship to manipulate and persuade viewers into believing the idea of illusion. Always an entertainer, the escape artist

Hereward Carrington, *Houdini and Conan Doyle: The Story of a Strange Friendship* (1933 reprint; New York: Benjamin Blom, Inc., 1972), 150-178, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, “Magician Attends Séance with Doyle in Atlantic City,” *Dallas Morning News*, October 28, 1922.

² Horace Green, “The Second Coming of Sir Arthur,” *The New York Times Magazine*, April 8, 1923.

³ Kenneth Silverman, *Houdini!!!: The Career of Ehrich Weiss* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1996), 298.

⁴ Ernst and Carrington, *Houdini and Conan Doyle*, xiii.

utilized his mastery of stage presence in his campaign against fake mediums. As a debunker of Spiritualism, Houdini felt responsible for creating a form of public awareness. Publicity in the press over his disagreements with Sir Arthur gave Houdini the opportunity to spread his approach to Spiritualism in an engaging way, much like his stage performances. Lecture tours provided another outlet for Houdini to apply his showmanship skills while informing the unsuspecting public of deceitful clairvoyants.

Being in the public eye for many years gave Houdini the experience and talent to present successful lectures to eager audiences. Houdini was a showman first and he proved his abilities primarily through amusement. Although the lectures were genuinely serious, Houdini added his own sense of flamboyance because he understood that spectators craved mystery and spectacular stunts. As a showman, Houdini stunned the public with seemingly impossible tricks and audiences were drawn into his lectures with the same interest as if watching him hang upside down in a straitjacket in Time Square. Although Houdini did not spark the large controversies as Conan Doyle did, the press was willing to print coverage of Houdini's tour because of his enthusiastic cleverness and mesmerizing entertainment.⁵

The structure of Houdini's lecture tours was rather unconventional. The press had grown accustomed to Houdini's dangerous escapades and the vaudevillian was determined to create lectures that rivaled his opponent's. Before Houdini's official tour began in 1924, over the course of several years, the magician kept his name in the press by exposing mediums and giving talks on the dangers of Spiritualism. Publicity was important for Houdini's own tours and for his career as he exposed false spiritualists.

⁵ Silverman, *Houdini!!!*.

“Houdini would murder his grandmother for publicity,” one of his friends noted.⁶ The consistent coverage of Houdini’s exploits provided a basis for his work as a spiritualist debunker and his well-known disapproval of mediums aided his arguments against Conan Doyle in newspaper disputes.⁷ By maintaining a constant place in the media, Houdini managed to use the publicity as advertising for his future endeavors.

Sir Arthur Conan Doyle’s second lecture tour aided his missionary vigor and provided Houdini with ammunition against Spiritualism. The tour also caused a rift in their friendship. From their first correspondence, the two men debated over the practices and methods of Spiritualism.⁸ The showmen were usually courteous and civil in their critiques of each other’s opinion in the press and during casual meetings; the press coverage, however, encouraged a battle of wits. As Conan Doyle continued with his tour, Houdini also began speaking out against Spiritualism and Sir Arthur in an unofficial lecture tour.⁹ While Sir Arthur was on tour, he continuously challenged Houdini in public to produce multiple spirits in the same fashion as well-known mediums. Since Doyle was seen as “the most prominent spiritualist in the world,” and Houdini was “the most

⁶ Silverman, *Houdini!!!*, 117, 298.

⁷ “Doyle in Denver Defies Houdini and Offers to Bring Dead Back Again,” *Denver Express*, May 9, 1923. “Doyle Argues with Houdini about Spirits,” April 30, newspaper clipping, Harry Houdini Scrapbook, microfilm, Library of Congress. “Sir Arthur Coming to Answer Houdini,” March 28, newspaper clipping Harry Houdini Scrapbook, microfilm, Library of Congress. Many of the newspaper and magazine clippings found in the Houdini Scrapbook do not have complete dates, authors, or publishers and often Houdini notes the information in his own hand. All of the annotations are based on the scrapbook and there is the possibility of inaccuracy.

⁸ Houdini, *A Magician Among the Spirits*, 138-140.

⁹ “Houdini to Talk of Spiritualism,” 1923, no publisher, newspaper clipping, Harry Houdini Scrapbook, microfilm, Library of Congress, “Houdini Will Lecture,” April 19, 1923, a newspaper clipping from a San Francisco paper, Harry Houdini Scrapbook, microfilm, Library of Congress, “Houdini to Lecture on Spiritualism,” April 1923, no publisher, newspaper clipping, Harry Houdini Scrapbook, microfilm, Library of Congress, “Houdini: The Man of Mystery will Lecture on ‘Fraud Mediums and Miracle Mongers,’” 1923, newspaper clipping with no publisher, Harry Houdini Scrapbook, microfilm, Library of Congress, “The Genius of Escape Houdini,” April 19, 1923, no publisher, Harry Houdini Scrapbook, microfilm, Library of Congress, “Houdini Raps Mystic Rappers,” May 6, 1923, *Sunday News*, newspaper clipping, Harry Houdini Scrapbook, microfilm, Library of Congress.

prominent unmasker of mediumistic methods,” the American public witnessed and encouraged open challenges to be broadcasted.¹⁰

When Houdini and Conan Doyle met on the lecture circuit, the press clamored for the lecturers to debate their causes. The *Denver Express* noted that Conan Doyle even challenged Houdini “to attend a sitting,” with each man backing his “beliefs with \$5,000.” However, Sir Arthur “shook his head sadly over public apathy,” as skeptics rose to question his beliefs.¹¹ When Conan Doyle traveled to Rochester to give a lecture on his new series, “The Scientific Side” and “Recent Psychic Evidence,” an article appeared in New York proclaiming, “Doyle Argues with Houdini About Spirits,” which showed the media’s interest from the western to the eastern part of the country.¹² The *New York Times* echoed that Conan Doyle would “answer Houdini,” who had “taken a decided stand in opposition to the theories of Sir Arthur.”¹³

The motivation for Houdini’s tours came from his desire to sway the minds of spiritualists, whether that be Conan Doyle or any believer in fraudulent mediums. Houdini used public awareness as a form of good publicity to lend further legitimacy to his tours. Houdini told reporters, “I would rather convince him [Sir Arthur] than any other man living.”¹⁴ Although Houdini did not share the same beliefs, he admired Conan Doyle’s faith in the connection between the physical and spirit world. In person, in the press, and from the stage, Houdini tried to warn Sir Arthur of illegitimate sittings, but the author did not heed Houdini’s warnings. “When I saw Sir Arthur I told him to be careful

¹⁰ Elford Eddy, “Houdini Challenged to Produce Spirits,” *The San Francisco Star*, March 23, 1923.

¹¹ “Doyle in Denver Defies Houdini.”

¹² “Doyle Argues with Houdini about Spirits.”

¹³ “Sir Arthur Coming to Answer Houdini.”

¹⁴ Helen Ryan, “The Mimic World,” *Wisconsin Sentinel*, January 4, 1923, newspaper clipping, Harry Houdini Scrapbook, microfilm, Library of Congress.

of his statements and explained a number of pitfalls he could avoid,” Houdini explained. “That’s all right, Houdini,” Conan Doyle replied, “don’t worry about me, I am well able to take care of myself. They cannot fool me.”¹⁵

After several stops on both lecture circuits, Houdini and Conan Doyle began treating each other roughly in the press because of comments made during presentations. Houdini began using his lectures as a way to expose Conan Doyle’s thoughts and accusing the author of accepting misinformation as fact. “Look to yourself and to your cause,” Houdini said to Conan Doyle, “for you are a victim of the foolery of darkened rooms.”¹⁶ Conan Doyle was always quick to fire back that he wanted Houdini to show him his mother exactly as her son knew her, present a connection to Kinsley Conan Doyle, and allow the late military officer, Innes Conan Doyle, to discuss family matters during a sitting.¹⁷ Houdini countered Sir Arthur by reporting in *The Oregonian*, “I do not claim that I can produce or materialize legitimately any of the loved ones of Sir Arthur or any one else, but I do claim and know that I can go to any séance along with Sir Arthur and that whatever happens there I can reproduce exactly.”¹⁸

Not only did Houdini’s talks reveal his “investigation of spiritualistic manifestations,” but also many of his visits were planned “in the near future of Conan Doyle’s.”¹⁹ Often Houdini’s lectures were scheduled near Conan Doyle’s to stir both the press and the British author. After several disagreements in the press, Sir Arthur sent a letter to Houdini, “I hate sparring with a friend in public,” he wrote, “but what can I do

¹⁵ Houdini, *A Magician Among the Spirits*, 138, 143.

¹⁶ Ernst and Carrington, *Houdini and Conan Doyle*, v.

¹⁷ “Conan Doyle Will Arrive Here Today,” *Indianapolis Star*, April 23, 1923.

¹⁸ Leon Cass Baer, “Famous Magician Unable to Accept Belief of Conan Doyle—Pacts with Friends Fail to Bring Back Dead,” *Oregonian*, March 12, 1923, newspaper clipping, Harry Houdini Scrapbook, microfilm, Library of Congress.

¹⁹ “Houdini to Talk of Spiritualism.”

when you say things which are not correct, and which I have to contradict or else they go by default.”²⁰

After Houdini’s successful Orpheum tour, he booked a lecture bureau, Coit-Alber, from Cleveland, Ohio to run his next tour in 1924. The tour began in February and lasted into the following year. Houdini spoke as a guest at the University of Illinois, St. Louis University, and the University of Wisconsin. He also addressed audiences in Cleveland, Pittsburgh, Birmingham, Albany, Boston, Daytona Beach, and Garnett, Kansas.²¹ Most often Houdini spoke in large lecture halls and theatres to “scientists, psychics, actors and everyday citizens.”²² Theatres were the most conducive for holding large audiences and for promoting the lectures as a form of entertainment. The magician was booked to speak at The Hill Street Theatre in Los Angeles, Ogden Theatre in Denver, the Paul Edgar Gallery in San Francisco, the Golden Gate Theatre, to name only a few.²³ Houdini used his experience as a medium from his days on the Vaudeville circuit and the many séances he attended as the basis of his discussions. Through critical editorials in the press and questions presented during lectures, audience members challenged Houdini’s theories and explanations. Often Houdini would present his lectures during his regular escape and magic shows to encourage more attendance. The Golden Gate Theatre in San Francisco noted that “in addition to regular performances Houdini,” would give an “illustrated lecture on Miracle Mongers and Fraud Mediums.” The showman would also “answer all questions from the audience” during the performance.²⁴

²⁰ Houdini, *A Magician Among the Spirits*, 150.

²¹ Silverman, *Houdini!!!*, 298-299.

²² “Houdini Raps Mystic Rappers.”

²³ “Houdini to Talk of Spiritualism,” “Doyle in Denver Defies Houdini and Offers to Bring Dead Back Again,” “Houdini Raps Mystic Rappers.”

²⁴ “The Genius of Escape Houdini.”

After working with the lecture bureau, the escape artist realized the need for more publicity. Coit-Alber lacked a publicity manager and the company did not persistently advertise as Houdini anticipated. “Am being properly mishandeled [*sic*] never no advance man no protection no billing,” Houdini telegraphed to Ohio, “How can I do business when there is no attention paid to exploitation.”²⁵ Although Houdini lacked the public support from the bureau, he was determined to send someone to investigate séances for him. Rose Mackenberg was hired to travel on Houdini’s tours and pose as a housewife so she would not be caught as she attended séances and wrote reports on her findings.²⁶ Mackenberg became a certified Spiritualist reverend by paying five dollars, which suggested the simple and corrupt process.²⁷ Houdini used the investigations to his advantage as another way to cajole skeptics and reveal fakes.²⁸

Since Houdini became responsible for his own tour publicity, many of his esteemed friends provided extra support. As Houdini continued his tour, famous authors and entrepreneurs noticed his work like Upton Sinclair, Rudyard Kipling, and Thomas Edison.²⁹ One close friend, Robert Gysel, often promoted Houdini’s tours during his own talks.³⁰ Gysel, an investigator of Spiritualism from Toledo, Ohio, spoke at universities echoing many of Houdini’s ideas. Another key advertising technique Houdini used was inviting anyone to his lecture at no charge. “There is no admission charge. The interested

²⁵ Silverman, *Houdini!!!*, 299.

²⁶ Rose Mackenberg to Houdini, July 4, 1926, Private Collection of Tom Boldt, Appleton, Wisconsin.

²⁷ Certificate of Mediumship, Date, Private Collection of Tom Boldt, Appleton, Wisconsin.

²⁸ William Kalush and Larry Sloman, *The Secret Life of Houdini: The Making of America’s First Superhero* (New York: Artria Books, 2006), 460.

²⁹ Silverman, *Houdini!!!*, 298.

³⁰ Robert Gysel to Harry Houdini, April 15, 1923, Private Collection of Tom Boldt, Appleton, Wisconsin.

public is cordially invited,” noted a San Francisco newspaper.³¹ Being a shrewd businessman, Houdini provided a free showing to gather more spectators. Recognizing that Conan Doyle publicized a ticket fee, Houdini was determined to welcome the American public to witness what he believed to be the truth.

Challenges and questions often changed the content of Houdini’s lectures, but generally the structure was maintained so the press could recognize the stability and report to future audience members. Houdini spoke for an hour and a half, and, depending on how long his presentation lasted, questions would be answered and the lecture would proceed for another hour. Relaying his experiences and reasons for researching Spiritualism was Houdini’s first priority. He provided a brief history of the religion and practices of spiritists, showing slides and photographs to give the viewers a sense of what went on during a séance and the phenomena that mediums claimed to produce.³² Houdini worked closely with the Eastman Kodak Company because of the photos he took during séances. Most of the developed prints had a “peculiar light” on them and Houdini used them as examples during his speeches.³³ After revealing some of the theories written in his books, Houdini would demonstrate various methods used during sittings to fool unsuspecting participants. The lecturer “demonstrated a number of the tricks employed by mediums to defraud their trustful victims,” the *Cincinnati Ohio Commercial Tribune* described, “Slate-writing, bell-ringing under mystifying circumstances, and even the much-discussed ‘ectoplasm’ were exposed as so many clever frauds.”³⁴ Queries and tests

³¹ “Houdini to Lecture On Spiritualism.”

³² “Houdini Will Lecture.”

³³ Harry Houdini to Eastman Kodak Company, July 16, 1923, Private Collection of Tom Boldt, Appleton, Wisconsin.

³⁴ “Houdini Raps Psychic Tricks,” *Cincinnati Ohio Commercial Tribune*, November 16, 1924.

from the audience finished the lecture and provided a chance for the press to report on the overall reaction.³⁵

One of the most publicized and important parts of Houdini's lectures became the exposure of Mina Crandon, a.k.a Margery. In 1923 Houdini was invited to join a committee assembled by the *Scientific American* to investigate spiritual phenomenon and the mediums who communed with the departed. The committee relied on Houdini for his experience as a conjurer and his authority on Spiritualism.³⁶ Houdini challenged many mediums to produce any type of spirit-guided marvels and as evidence of his own skill, he wagered sums of money ranging from \$5,000 to \$10,000.³⁷ The *Scientific American* also put forth prize money of \$5,000 to any capable medium who could pass the committee's rigorous tests.³⁸ Margery was one of the few mediums the committee members, with the exception of Houdini, considered legitimate.³⁹ Houdini wrote an exposé of the Margery case and published it during the proceedings and determined that she was indeed a fraud after the first of many trial séances.⁴⁰ Robert Gysel promoted

³⁵ "The Genius of Escape Houdini."

³⁶ "Houdini Coming Wednesday to Expose 'Spirit' Frauds."

³⁷ According to Economic History. net (www.eh.net) \$10,000 in 1924 is about \$422,000 (unskilled wage) in 2009.

³⁸ J. Malcolm Bird, "Our Psychic Investigation," *The Scientific American*, January 1923.

³⁹ Harry Houdini to E. J. Dingwall, September 2, 1924, Private Collection of Tom Boldt, Appleton, Wisconsin.

⁴⁰ Harry Houdini to E. J. Dingwall, July 7, 1924, Private Collection of Tom Boldt, Appleton, Wisconsin, *Expose the Tricks Used by the Boston Medium 'Margery'* (New York: Adams Press, 1924). One of the most famous pieces in Houdini's book is his exposure of Margery through a rubber band trick. Often Houdini illustrated his point during his lectures. Houdini wrote: "Anticipating this sort of work I would have to do in the detecting the movements of her foot I had rolled my right trouser leg up above my knee. All that day I had worn a silk rubber bandage around that leg just below the knee. By night the part of the leg below the bandage had become swollen and painfully tender, thus giving me a much keener sense of feeling and making it easier to notice the slightest sliding of Mrs. Crandon's ankle or flexing of her muscles" (6).

Houdini's book during his lectures and wrote Houdini after asking for five hundred copies, "I could have sold 50 that night at the Psychology class at 50 cents."⁴¹

Houdini presented his conclusions during his lecture tour as a way to promote his book and to lend additional credibility to his influence. In a transcript of one lecture, Houdini notes that several hundred people attended the lecture and all eyes focused on him throughout the production. After establishing his integrity and showing multiple images, he performed a trick with two pairs of slates. When the stunt was completed, there was a picture of Walter, Margery's brother and ghostly assistant in séances, between the two slates. The audience was awestruck because the trick was only achieved by using a dictionary and a card.⁴²

After observing Houdini's exposure of Margery and many other prominent mediums, members of the public and press challenged his theories against noted spiritualists and scientists. Uncovering Margery's schemes caused trouble for some of Houdini's friends because some of her supporters rallied against the lectures. Robert Gysel, a known Houdini supporter, corresponded with the magician and said, "Margery is going to have me arrested." An arrest warrant was posted in Toledo and Gysel wrote to Houdini for help with an attorney. "That challenge of yours in the *Toledo Blade*," Gysel noted, "has caused quite a strip here in Toledo."⁴³

⁴¹ Robert Gysel to Harry Houdini, April 16, 1923, Private Collection of Tom Boldt, Appleton, Wisconsin.

⁴² For a full description of the trick and lecture see "Houdini On Spiritualism," lecture at Symphony Hall, Boston, January 3, 1925, Library of Congress.

⁴³ Robert Gysel to Harry Houdini, August 24, 1925, Private Collection of Tom Boldt, Appleton, Wisconsin.

As Houdini's reputation as a spiritualist challenger grew, his crusade against fraudulent mediums became more popular in the press. Before he began his lecture tours, Houdini made an effort to expose deception by writing numerous books describing the tricks and phony phantasms fashioned by alleged crooks. The books provided another way for Houdini to assert his fame as an authority on Spiritualism and because of the favorable press coverage; more people accepted his ideas and purchased his books. Between 1920 and 1924 Houdini published four books uncovering the history and hoaxes of spiritualist practices.⁴⁴ *On Deception, Miracle Mongers and Their Methods, Exposé of Margery*, and *A Magician Among the Spirits* presented a way for Houdini to express his dislike of con artists and to warn the unsuspecting public. Publishing a number of books allowed Houdini to compete with rival scientists, clergymen, and skeptics who also attempted to gain the attention of the American public. Both Houdini and Conan Doyle wrote extensively about each other's beliefs and careers in their publications, which not only prolonged their public disputes but also stimulated more interest in their causes. Often, Houdini was quoted in articles relating to Spiritualism and he would submit editorial comments at the request of a newspaper. Accustomed to spiritualists' eccentric opinions, reporters frequently published Houdini's thoughts because of his contrasting and confident ability to attract readership. Drawing the extra exposure to his cause, Houdini was able to maintain a firm grasp on the media as an additional promotional instrument.⁴⁵

⁴⁴ Harry Houdini, *On Deception* (1906-1920 reprint; New York: Hesperus Press Limited, 2009), Harry Houdini, *Miracle Mongers and Their Methods: A Complete Exposé* (1921 reprint; Buffalo: Prometheus Books, 1993), Harry Houdini, *Expose the Tricks Used by the Boston Medium 'Margery'* (New York: Adams Press, 1924), Houdini, *A Magician Among the Spirits*.

⁴⁵ Silverman, *Houdini!!!*.

Houdini's first book *On Deception* was a short exposé revealing the tricks of thieves, jailbreakers, fake mediums, magicians who used skeleton keys and straitjackets, and other performers Houdini found to be dishonest. He also began making the first notes for *Miracle Mongers and Their Methods*. In the section on bogus illusions, Houdini called for an investigation of techniques used by mediums during sittings. Reiterating his open mind, Houdini noted that Spiritualism was “really a beautiful belief” but only for those who were “honest and believe[d] in it...” Houdini often said he wanted to believe in Spiritualism if he could find a reliable source to show him that the religion was legitimate. “I am sorry to say,” Houdini lamented, “that no one has ever produced anything for me that would smack of the spiritual.”⁴⁶ *On Deception* was very short and the author only presented a minor appeal to readers.

When Houdini embarked on his own lecture tour, he used the publicity of his previous stunts and challenges to advertise for his lectures. Houdini enthralled audiences by creating mock séances and demonstrating to the public the tricks and evidence of physical illusion seen during a sitting. Houdini's *Miracle Mongers and their Methods* was first published in 1921 and it exposed fraudulent mediums, fire-eaters, sword-swallowers, strongmen and other assortments of so-called con artists. His research on misleading mediums was the foundation of many lectures.⁴⁷ Among the descriptions of strange performers, Houdini advised learned men to leave Spiritualism because they misinterpreted mediums' abilities. “The credulous, wonder-loving scientist,” Houdini penned, “still abides with us, and while his serious-minded brothers are wringing from Nature her jealously guarded secrets, the knowledge of which benefits all mankind, he

⁴⁶ Houdini, *On Deception*, 17.

⁴⁷ “Houdini to Talk of Spiritualism,” “Houdini Will Lecture,” “Houdini to Lecture on Spiritualism.” “Houdini: The Man of Mystery Will Lecture on ‘Fraud Mediums and Miracle Mongers.’”

gravely follows that periennial [*sic*] Will-of-the-wisp, spiritism, and lays the flat unction to his soul that he is investigating ‘psychic phenomena,’ when in reality he is merely gazing with unseeing eyes on the flimsy juggling of pseudo-mediums.”⁴⁸ By using notes from his book; Houdini was able to publicize his literary work and offer integrity to his research. Although he could oppose people from the stage, his books provided a constant challenge even when the tour was over.

Frequently, newspaper reporters would write to Houdini to review his standpoint for a press release about the Margery case. George Ryan the city editor of *The Boston Herald* wrote to Houdini “to get a scoop for the Herald,” and “to create such a stink that all the scientists on the committee would be forced to talk in self defense.”⁴⁹ Houdini even used the comments made in the press as an additional editorial collection in his book *Houdini Exposes the Tricks Used by the Boston Medium Margery*. “. . .it has been discovered that when precautions against deception have been taken,” commented *The New York Times*, “that content Mr. Houdini, much experienced in mediumistic trickery, the spirits refuse to perform.”⁵⁰ The *Buffalo Enquirer* noted that “Setting a magician to catch a medium is old stuff, but quite as reasonable as setting a thief to catch a thief.” Since the magician would not stop his investigation until all the sittings were finalized, the public was “more inclined to trust Houdini to get at the truth of the matter than any committee of psychic experts.”⁵¹

⁴⁸ Houdini, *Miracle Mongers and Their Methods*, 96-97.

⁴⁹ George Ryan to Harry Houdini, October 26, 1925, Private Collection of Tom Boldt, Appleton, Wisconsin.

⁵⁰ “Houdini Stopped Show,” *The New York Times*, August 29, 1924, newspaper clipping, Harry Houdini Scrapbook. microfilm, Library of Congress.

⁵¹ Houdini, “Editorial Comments in the Margery Case,” *Houdini Exposes the Boston Medium Margery*, 28.

Houdini always made it clear to his audiences and to the press that prior to his career as an escape artist, he was a practicing medium. “As I advanced to riper years of experience I was brought to a realization of the seriousness of trifling with the hallowed reverence which the average human being bestows on the departed,” Houdini wrote in *A Magician Among the Spirits*. “And when I personally became afflicted with similar grief I was chagrined that I should ever have been guilty of such frivolity and for the first time realized that it bordered on crime.”⁵² By revealing his past as a medium, Houdini illustrated his knowledge of mystifying tricks and his ability to determine whether a medium was using legitimate means to identify spiritual phenomena.

Always preserving his name in the press, Houdini even encouraged his fellow magicians to counter Conan Doyle’s attacks. “Conan Doyle has seen fit to call magicians tricksters,” a disgruntled showman said, “we contend that certain so-called mediums are tricksters also. All we want is a chance to prove who are the tricksters.”⁵³ The rivals even gained attention from critics when Houdini’s *A Magician Among the Spirits* was compared to Conan Doyle’s *Memories and Adventures* in *The Nation*. After giving a brief summary of each book, R. F. Dibble paid particular attention to the dispute over the Atlantic City séance, which caused a great stir in the press. After Houdini informed the Doyles of his mother’s inability to speak English, Sir Arthur quickly replied, “a spirit becomes more educated the longer it has departed,” and Houdini’s mother was able to “master the English language in heaven.”⁵⁴ Although the adversaries competed in the press and attempted to convert and sway each other’s opinions, the public interest in both

⁵² Houdini, *A Magician Among the Spirits*, xi.

⁵³ “Colleagues of Houdini Aroused by Conan Doyle,” *The Billboard*, April 14, 1923.

⁵⁴ R. F. Dibble, “Twin Prestidigitators,” *The Nation* (December 17, 1924): 682-683.

men allowed the showman to deliver stirring lectures that left audiences spellbound.⁵⁵ Because it was, after all, show business.

To further establish his credibility as an expert on deception, Houdini would repeatedly tell the press that he had twenty-five to thirty years of experience researching Spiritualism. Well spoken and astute, Houdini had little difficulty convincing reporters of his knowledge of psychical research. Armed with the largest spiritual library in the United States, and often reported in the world, Houdini dedicated his time to explaining the history of Spiritualism and the negative affect it was having on patrons because of exploitative mediums. Newspapermen genuinely believed that Houdini was “doing his best to keep down the sucker rate.”⁵⁶

Attempting to sway the mind of the public and justifying his argument to Sir Arthur guided most of Houdini’s lectures as he continued to speak; however, his defiance of Spiritualism provided a greater means of publicity in the press. The attention from the press supplied further credence that Houdini was an authority to lecture against deceptive mediums.⁵⁷ In an interview Houdini was said to have “attended 10,000 séances,” and “sat with nearly every European medium of repute.”⁵⁸ *The Torch* in Cleveland, Ohio, described Houdini as a great performer but in recent years he proved to be an expert in psychical research and Spiritualism. “While Houdini is perhaps best known as a magician, in which capacity he was before the public for many years,” the newspaper reports, “he is as great authority on spiritualism as he is performer of seeming miracles—

⁵⁵ Ernst and Carrington, *Houdini and Conan Doyle*, 16.

⁵⁶ Houdini, “Editorial Comments,” 31.

⁵⁷ Silverman, *Houdini!!!*, 301.

⁵⁸ “Doyle Argues with Houdini About Spirits.”

probably the greatest in the world.”⁵⁹ Establishing himself in the press allowed Houdini to further his cause as a lecturer and as an influence on the religion. “For some thirty years,” *The Nation* reported, Houdini “carefully studied every phase of psychic phenomena,” and he “amassed a huge library on the subject...and attended all manner of hair-raising séances—which, nevertheless, have failed to make a single hair on his own head wiggle.”⁶⁰

After Margery was exposed, newspapers clung to Houdini because of his role on the committee and his book. “It was a sad day for the spiritualistic ‘mediums’ when they permitted Harry Houdini, the magician, to watch some of their demonstrations,” observed a reporter from *Providence News*. “Bah Blah and Ba, Houdini can –and will—if given the opportunity,” reported *The Sphinx*, “show up the entire fraternity of the self-styled bridges between the known and the unknown.” Praised for his work in the media, Houdini continued his efforts to uncover the work of mediums like Margery. “If there is one man in this country whose activities the busy-bodies should curtail,” suggested the *Catholic Observer*, “that man is Harry Houdini, ‘handcuff king.’” The *Observer* continued, “No sooner does some ‘spirit’ medium, etc., come to the fore with great claims of mysterious powers that gain him or her a great following of credulous Yankees, including not a few so-called scientists, who are always waiting to be baffled, than Houdini appears on the scene and explains how the ‘spirits are moved.’”⁶¹

Houdini consistently claimed an open mind toward Spiritualism but he questioned the work of mediums because of deceptive tricks. “First and foremost, I am not exposing Clairvoyancey or mind reading tricks,” Houdini noted. “I am exposing fraud mediums

⁵⁹ “Houdini Coming Wednesday to Expose ‘Spirit’ Frauds,” *The Torch*, February 25, 1924.

⁶⁰ Dibble, “Twin Prestidigitators.”

⁶¹ Houdini, “Editorial Comments,” 27-32.

who obtain huge fortunes by subterfuge, that I believe have never before been exposed and known only to the inner craft.”⁶² The showman always asserted his devotion to informing the public of trickery and deception. “It has been my life work to invent and publicly present problems,” Houdini wrote, “I view these so-called phenomena from a different angle than the ordinary layman or even the expert investigator.”⁶³

Since Houdini was extremely vocal about his opinions of Spiritualism, the press often printed Houdini’s own attitudes along with the critiques of his lectures and challenges. Because of his showmanship skills and his disapproving views of Sir Arthur’s theories, newspapers were generally positive when analyzing the presentations. Many reporters praised Houdini for guiding the public away from the alleged foolishness: “Men like Houdini help along a good deal the sanity of the world,” Dr. Frank Crane of *The Evening Telegram*, wrote, “by showing the public that most of the hocus-pocus put forward by people who claim to be assisted by the spirits and by magic are nothing but clever tricks.”⁶⁴ *The Providence News* noted the lecturer’s fine work and encouraged, “More power to Houdini to run the fakirs [*sic*] out of business!”⁶⁵

Publishing the challenges between Houdini and the public also took up many pages in newspapers. “Those who wish to be fair-minded toward the claims of spiritualism are finding themselves up a stump,” a reporter from *The Anaconda Standard* described, “put there by the strange controversy between J. H. McKenzie, president of the London Psychical College, and Harry Houdini, the famous magician.”⁶⁶ Newspapers

⁶² Harry Houdini to George Newman, August 24, 1923, Private Collection of Tom Boldt, Appleton, Wisconsin.

⁶³ Houdini, *A Magician Among the Spirits*, xiv.

⁶⁴ Dr. Frank Crane, “Houdini,” *The Evening Telegram*, February, 1923, no specified date, newspaper clipping, Harry Houdini Scrapbook, microfilm, Library of Congress.

⁶⁵ “Houdini and Spiritism,” *The Providence News*, August 30, 1924.

⁶⁶ “Magicians and Mediums,” *The Anaconda Standard*, November 26, 1922.

were even willing to remind readers that Houdini's prize money had yet to be claimed. "He calls attention to the fact that there have been standing offers of \$5,000 for a single, simple demonstration that can be proved genuine spiritualism....and strange as it may seem," noted a journalist, "up to the present time, of the multitude of mediums not one has come forward to claim the prize."⁶⁷ William H. Burr, president of the New York Assembly of Spiritualists and president of the board of trustees of Plymouth Spiritual Church in Rochester, also challenged Houdini's accusations against Spiritualism. "I'll get Houdini's \$10,000," Burr asserted, "or give up my faith in the attempt." *The Rochester Times Union* reported that Burr proposed assembling a group of judges to mediate a séance in which both men would produce psychic phenomena.⁶⁸ The challenges from the public and an acknowledgement from the press demonstrated the continued interest in Spiritualism as Houdini continued with his tours.

Newspapers also reported on the comments Houdini made to the public and journalists published his opinion without much criticism. The press cooperated with the escape artist by printing Houdini's thoughts often, which kept the public informed and engaged. "My attitude toward the public is practically the same as that of Sir Oliver Lodge," Houdini proclaimed, "I give my own honest opinions together with many reasons for arriving at them, but with little hope for making converts."⁶⁹ After demonstrations, Houdini reported back to the press about the reactions of audience members. "By employing the 'magic' at hand, by resorting to the intricate tricks I had mastered," Houdini expressed, "I firmly convinced these men and women that I was

⁶⁷ "Magicians and Mediums," *The Anaconda Standard*, November 26, 1922.

⁶⁸ "William Burr Pledges Faith Against Houdini," *Rochester Times Union*, June 16, 1923.

⁶⁹ Harry Houdini, "My Attitude," manuscript, Private Collection of Tom Boldt, Appleton, Wisconsin.

talking with spirits.” Many spectators believed the false séances. Houdini wanted audiences to realize that he “never had a message from another world.”⁷⁰

Frequently, newspapers would print Houdini’s warnings to the public after he attended a séance. “I have seen people who, previous to the war [World War I], never concerned themselves with things psychic now delving into it to the point of hysteria,” Houdini observed in Boston, “It is conducive of morbidness, brooding and melancholia. It becomes an obsession very quickly and I would warn against it.”⁷¹ This same story was reported in at least three newspapers across the country. *The Kalamazoo Gazette* in Michigan, the *San Jose Mercury Herald* in California, and the *Twin Falls News* in Idaho, reported the story from Boston because of the widespread interest in Spiritualism. The coverage by numerous papers supplied Houdini with another way to publicly denounce inaccurate psychical research and physical illusion used in séances.

While on stage Harry Houdini was known for his ability to impress the American public with his charisma and unexplainable tricks and escapes. Houdini mastered the art of showmanship early in his career and he perfected the act of directing audiences to hang on his every word. As Houdini embarked on his movement against fraudulent mediums, he used his showmanship skills to inform the public before people were credulously duped into following frauds and scam artists. In the public sphere, Houdini used the publicity from his encounters with Sir Arthur Conan Doyle and an ongoing lecture series to openly warn the public of deceptive intentions. For those people who did not follow his lecture tour, Houdini wrote numerous books proclaiming what he believed

⁷⁰ “Houdini and Spiritualism,” *The Sunday Call*, Newark, N.J., November 12, 1922.

⁷¹ “Houdini Sees Psychic Danger,” *The Kalamazoo Gazette*, October 18, 1922, “Warns Against Morbid Thought,” *Twin Falls News*, October 18, 1922, “Psychic Studies Unbalance Many,” *San Jose Mercury Herald*, November 9, 1922.

to be the truth about spiritualists allegedly practiced. Newspapers also aided his efforts by printing articles and stories of Houdini's exploits as a medium in Vaudeville and his investigations into famed mediums like Margery Crandon. Houdini's productive efforts stirred many people to reject Spiritualism and the showman, always eager to gain attention, established credibility through the public's skepticism.

Conclusion

Modern Spiritualism emerged in the mid-nineteenth century and the mysterious practices demonstrated by early mediums and believers, caused the public's curiosity and skepticism to increase into the twentieth century. Since Spiritualism provided comfort and a chance to defy death and achieve immortality, mediums became popular as people began believing in the idea of life after death. Clergymen were opposed to the religion because it relied too heavily on physical illusion and the need to see a departed loved one in order to accept death. Faith in an unseen God was the foundation of mainstream Christianity, and Spiritualism questioned the unnecessary need to meet spirits. Scientists were also skeptical of the practices of Spiritualism because there was little scientific evidence that proved the existence of seven spheres or explained why a medium was able to produce ectoplasm during a sitting. Although the American public observed the disbelief in newspapers, people still inquired after mediums.

As the practices of Spiritualism became more popular, Vaudeville sideshows used the same concepts to present mock séances to awestruck audiences. Harry Houdini first began his career on stage as a medium. He was able to masterfully manipulate physical manifestations to appear real. Houdini was able to capture the same comforting feeling as a medium as he produced conjuring tricks to unsuspecting audiences. After realizing the negative affect many mediums had on patrons, Houdini gave up his act and began his campaign against fraudulent clairvoyants. The escape artist claimed that most mediums were only out to make money and to scam gullible sitters into believing false psychical apparitions. Always claiming an open mind, Houdini traveled the world in search of

legitimate mediums. As Houdini embarked on his career as a spiritualist debunker, he legitimized his authority as a researcher and investigator of Spiritualism.

As Modern Spiritualism began spreading in England, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle also joined the number of curious skeptics. Following a successful writing career, Conan Doyle gave up Sherlock Holmes to pursue Spiritualism and to attend many séances to determine authenticity. After realizing the benefits and comfort attributed to a medium's intervention in séance, Sir Arthur wholeheartedly accepted Spiritualism as a legitimate sect of Christianity. The famed author then made it his mission to provide the truth about Spiritualism to anyone who would listen. Scheduling lecture tours around the world, Conan Doyle preached the religion of Spiritualism as genuine truth and he gained support from believers and the inquisitive.

By the 1920s, Spiritualism had gained considerable popularity in the United States. Spiritualist churches were well established and frequently newspaper articles depicted séances and the success of mediums. In 1922, the Doyle family traveled to America for Sir Arthur's first lecture tour. The press mobbed the foreign visitor and people flocked to sold out lecture halls to hear the spiritualist speak. Skillfully Sir Arthur showed images of spirit photography, explained the consistency of ectoplasm, and gave a history of Spiritualism to mesmerized audiences. The lecturer was a traditional showman. He captivated listeners with his stories of séances and he expertly described the wonders of the hereafter.

The popular press followed each of Conan Doyle's lectures because the American public continued to show interest in Spiritualism. Although some of his beliefs were questioned, he was highly respected often quoted. It was difficult to determine how many

people began firmly trusting in Spiritualism after Conan Doyle's tour, but regardless of the number, Spiritualism had a solid grasp on the public's mind.

As Houdini continued his tours as an escape artist, he also began lecturing on its approaches to Spiritualism. After twenty-five years of consistent examination, Houdini believed it was his responsibility to heighten the public's awareness of dishonest mediums. When Sir Arthur returned for a second tour of the United States, Houdini saw an opportunity to use the Englishman's publicity to advance his own lecture tour. Challenging Conan Doyle in the press provided Houdini with additional advertising for his campaign against Spiritualism. While on stage, Houdini used his showmanship skills to influence viewers' opinions and to demonstrate his ability to produce physical materializations. Along with his lecture tours, Houdini also published books denouncing the criminal acts of mediums. Newspaper reporters also agreed to print his exposés and investigations as a counter measure against the press coverage received by Conan Doyle and other spiritualists.

After 1930, the belief in Spiritualism began to wane as people became disinterested. Harry Houdini's career was cut short in 1926 after his appendix ruptured because of a punch to his stomach, dying a few days after the fatal blow. Sir Arthur Conan Doyle continued his spiritualist crusade until his death in 1930. By challenging society's view of Spiritualism, Houdini was successfully able to contribute to the decline of practicing mediums and the belief in spiritualistic faith. Spiritualism no longer provided a sense of consoling reassurance or even entertainment. Both men left a lasting legacy not only as entertainers and showmen, but also as missionaries, braving the public and the press with their fervent beliefs. Although both men never agreed on the

legitimacy of Spiritualism, they did understand the impact the religion and practices had on the American public. Through media coverage and persistent communication with audiences and readers, Houdini and Conan Doyle recognized the interest in Spiritualism and pursued their causes with vigor and skillful talent.

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