

‘Mr. Spiritualism’

Maurice Barbanell and his Life as a Twentieth-Century Spiritualist Propagandist

by

Nicholas Richbell

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Examining Committee Membership

The following served on the Examining Committee for this thesis. The decision of the Examining Committee is by majority vote.

External Examiner

NAME: Dr. Joy Dixon
Title: Associate Professor, History
University of British Columbia

Supervisor(s)

NAME: Dr. Andrew Hunt
Title: Professor, History
University of Waterloo

Internal Member

NAME: Dr. Jane Nicholas
Title: Professor, History
St. Jerome's University

Internal-external Member

NAME: Dr. Scott Kline
Title: Associate Professor, Religious Studies
St. Jerome's University

Other Member(s)

NAME: Dr. Sofie Lachapelle
Title: Dean, Faculty of Arts
Wilfrid Laurier University

Author's Declaration

I hereby declare that I am the sole author of this thesis. This is a true copy of the thesis, including any required final revisions, as accepted by my examiners.

I understand that my thesis may be made electronically available to the public.

Abstract

This dissertation explores the life and career of Maurice Barbanell, British businessman, journalist, newspaper editor, medium, and long-time propagandist of Spiritualism. Spiritualism—a religion, a science, and a philosophy—is based around the belief, or knowledge, that the human soul survives death and that communications with discarnate spirits is possible. Barbanell spent sixty-one years sharing the wisdom and teachings of his spirit guide, Silver Birch. Born into a Jewish/Atheist family, Barbanell was scornful of Spiritualism until he attended his first séances in his late teenage years, and it was during his second séance that Silver Birch began communicating through him. This dissertation follows Maurice Barbanell from his humble beginnings in east London, to meeting his spirit guide for the first time, and the medium's involvement with a group of séance sitters known as the 'Hannen Swaffer home circle'. Barbanell's impact on Spiritualism is discussed in relation to lectures he gave about Spiritualism across the United Kingdom as well as the leading spiritualist newspaper he founded. The movement has long endured criticisms and accusations of fraudulent mediumship and Maurice Barbanell's many legal cases are explored in this dissertation, as he defended the religion he fervently supported. Further, Barbanell's rapid rise as a Spiritualist leader came as people turned away from organized religion towards Spiritualism after the First World War, and this dissertation will continue to study the medium's endeavors during and after the Second World War, a lesser studied period of Spiritualism.

This dissertation studies in detail, for the first time, the contributions one man made to a movement that has ebbed and flowed in popularity, leading to him being called 'Mr. Spiritualism'. Leading figures of Spiritualism came before him; however, this dissertation will argue that Maurice Barbanell was well-deserving of the moniker 'Mr. Spiritualism' as this dissertation clearly demonstrates his unwavering support and defense of Spiritualism.

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Working full-time while pursuing a PhD is not something to be taken lightly. Many times, over the course of the program I have wanted to withdraw and return my life to “regular programming”. However, with the support and encouragement of family, friends, and colleagues, I have achieved what I thought at the beginning was to be an impossible task.

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I could not have conducted research for this dissertation without the financial support of the JV Trust. I am also extremely fortunate to have been afforded the time away from work by the University of Waterloo Library without which I would still be writing this dissertation in my senior years. The Inter-Library Loan department at the Library deserves a special mention: I am amazed at the support received from the team who was able to locate a great number of resources for me, often with limited information I was able to provide.

My sincere thanks also go to the staff at Senate House Library, the British Library, the London Metropolitan Archives, the National Archives at Kew, and Lambeth Palace Library. It was an amazing, and exciting, experience to sit on the other side of the archive table. Kudos to the University of Manitoba’s Archives and Special Collections department: this project would not have been possible without being able to freely access *Psychic News* online.

I am also incredibly grateful to those who agreed to be interviewed for my dissertation: Al Batten, Rev. Angie Morra, Rev. Karen Charles, Lesley Brooks, Roy Stemman, and Wilma Trebell. Rev. Dorinda Kruger and Walter Meyer zu Erpen receive my heartfelt thanks for their willingness to talk about my work.

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Introduction

After enduring over eighty years of contempt and scorn, Spiritualism, in spite of the hurricane of lies and calumny that has swept against it, is becoming a power in the land. It will now be justified, as are all things, by its works...

*Psychic News*¹

Modern Spiritualism – a religion, a science, and a philosophy – began on March 31, 1848, in Hydesville, New York. The Fox family, notably the two young daughters Kate and Maggie, heard ‘rappings’ in the walls of the modest house they shared with their parents. The ‘rappings’ were from the spirit of a murdered pedlar who had been buried in the basement of the house now occupied by the Fox family. The girls, along with their older sister, Leah, went on to give public demonstrations of spirit rappings across the northeastern United States. The extraordinary story of the Fox sisters and how they sparked a movement has been widely studied and discussed.² The important aspect of the events that followed is that they “confirmed that the Spirit World actually existed, and we could communicate with those who lived there.”³

These supernormal events were the start of a widespread cultural and religious movement that gripped the United States before crossing the Atlantic to the United Kingdom. The American medium Maria B. Hayden (often only referred to as Mrs. Hayden) arrived in London in 1852 and gave a series

¹ “Our Policy,” *Psychic News*, May 28, 1932, 6.

² Ruth Brandon, *The Spiritualists: The Passion for the Occult in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries*, 1st American ed. (New York: Knopf: Distributed by Random House, 1983), 1–41; Ann Braude, *Radical Spirits: Spiritualism and Women’s Rights in Nineteenth-Century America*, 2nd ed. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001), 10–31; Lisa Morton, *Calling the Spirits: A History of Séances*, London: Reaktion Books, 2020, 107–118; Barbara Weisberg, *Talking to the Dead: Kate and Maggie Fox and the Rise of Spiritualism*, First HarperCollins paperback edition published in 2005 (New York: Harper Collins, 2005).

³ Albert Batten, *Philosophy of Spiritualism - Its Origins and History*. (SDU Publications, 2014), 54.

of séances, thus introducing spirit communication to the British.⁴ Spiritualism soon became more than a Victorian parlour game on both sides of the Atlantic as it “represented a cry for universal justice. It was a vehicle for social activism; championing labour reform, the anti-slavery movement, the temperance movement, women’s rights, child labour issues, rights to education, and it fought rigorously against religious intolerance.”⁵ As with the story of the Fox sisters, a wealth of literature has been created since the advent of Modern Spiritualism. The writing about Spiritualism can be categorized in several ways. There are excellent studies by Ann Braude, Alex Owen, and Marlene Tromp that discuss the move away from Calvinist thought and how Spiritualism afforded women the opportunity to move from the private to the public sphere in America and England.⁶ Janet Oppenheim provided a detailed biography of the British men, and few women, involved in psychical research until the start of the First World War.⁷ Molly McGarry and Beth A. Robertson built on this scholarship, continuing the discussions about the role of women, race, class, and a changing culture brought on by Spiritualism, both introducing issues of masculinity in the séance room, possibly for the first time.⁸ McGarry focused on the cultural politics of nineteenth-century America, while Robertson used a transnational lens, bringing America, Canada, and Great Britain together during the

⁴ Sharon DeBartolo Carmack, *In Search of Maria B. Hayden: The American Medium Who Brought Spiritualism to the U.K* (Salt Lake City, Utah: Scattered Leaves Press, 2020), 87.

⁵ Batten, *Philosophy of Spiritualism - Its Origins and History.*, 55.

⁶ Braude, *Radical Spirits*; Alex Owen, *The Darkened Room: Women, Power, and Spiritualism in Late Victorian England*, The New Cultural Studies Series (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1990); Marlene Tromp, *Altered States: Sex, Nation, Drugs, and Self-Transformation in Victorian Spiritualism* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2006).

⁷ Janet Oppenheim, *The Other World: Spiritualism and Psychical Research in England, 1850-1914* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985).

⁸ Molly McGarry, *Ghosts of Futures Past: Spiritualism and the Cultural Politics of Nineteenth-Century America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008); Beth A. Robertson, *Science of the Séance: Transnational Networks and Gendered Bodies in the Study of Psychic Phenomena, 1918-40* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2016).

interwar period. Claudie Massicotte and Stan McMullin studied the séance rooms of central Canada.⁹ These scholars contributed to an area of study that was “virtually non-existent” only a decade earlier.¹⁰

Other notable works were produced by individuals involved in the Spiritualist movement. These include general histories written by Sir. Arthur Conan Doyle, or personal experiences of spirit communication of Sir. Oliver Lodge.¹¹ Indeed, most Spiritualist writing has been produced either by adherents of the religion, whether mediums themselves or those who simply believed in the afterlife, or by authors writing stories half-based on historical truths. There is a lack of academic research on Spiritualism after the heydays of the religion during Victorian times, especially in the years following World War II. This dissertation will add to the literature on Spiritualism with a focus on the movement from 1920 until 1981, the period when a British medium, Maurice Barbanell, worked with his spirit guide, Silver Birch, to share the guide’s teachings with the world. In that process, Barbanell became Spiritualism’s leading propagandist of the twentieth century.

As an archivist by profession, I had hoped to experience the “archive fever” so excitably described by Carolyn Steedman, “Archive Fever comes on at night, long after the archive has shut for the day. Typically,” she continued, “the fever – more accurately, the precursor fever – starts in the

⁹ Claudie Massicotte, *Trance Speakers: Femininity and Authorship in Spiritual Séances, 1850-1930* (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2017); Stanley Edward McMullin, *Anatomy of a Séance: A History of Spirit Communication in Central Canada*, McGill-Queen’s Studies in the History of Religion 28 (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2004).

¹⁰ Walter J. Meyer zu Erpen and Joy Lowe, “The Canadian Spiritualist Movement and Sources for Its Study,” *Archivaria* 30 (Summer 1990): 72.

¹¹ Brandon, *The Spiritualists*; Sir Oliver Lodge, *Raymond or Life after Death with Examples of the Evidence for Survival of Memory and Affection after Death*, 3rd ed. (London, UK: Methuen & Co. Ltd., 1916); Arthur Conan Doyle, *The History of Spiritualism: Volumes I and II, Complete and Unabridged* (Pantianos Classics, 2019).

early hours of the morning, in the bed of a cheap hotel where the historian cannot get to sleep.”¹² Steedman wrote about being surrounded by the dust of people. I hoped to experience the dust of Maurice Barbanell tucked away in some British archive. After all, no biography, or autobiography, about him exists until now. Being the first person to handle Barbanell’s papers from a long time ago would have been a unique experience. However, after an extensive search, high and low, I discovered that Maurice Barbanell did not leave an archive of manuscripts, letters, memos, and photographs that would have significantly added to this work undertaken. He did, I was informed, keep papers in his office safe: yet where they are now, nobody knew.¹³ Although “the Archive is made from selected and consciously chosen documentation from the past and also from the mad fragmentations that no one intended to preserve,” these collections about the life and career of *someone* are valuable to the historian who attempts to piece that life together.¹⁴ Fortunately, Maurice Barbanell’s handwritten voice is captured in two archival collections, and we hear them throughout this dissertation. I also take the liberty of considering *Psychic News*, the Spiritualist newspaper that Barbanell founded and edited, as his archive, and have used this resource extensively throughout. Drawing on articles from the British daily press has also allowed Maurice Barbanell’s voice to be heard.

Even though this life history is looking at the past, I wanted to hear voices from the present day, from those who personally knew Maurice Barbanell and those who knew of him or were familiar with the teachings of Silver Birch. Many connections were made or attempted; most declined to be interviewed or have yet to respond to the invitation to participate in this study. However, three Canadian Spiritualist ministers, a fourth-generation Canadian Spiritualist, and a journalist, colleague,

¹² Carolyn Steedman, *Dust: The Archive and Cultural History*, Encounters (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2002), 17.

¹³ Private email message to author, August 21, 2020.

¹⁴ Steedman, *Dust*, 68.

and friend of Maurice Barbanell answered questions about his life. They also discussed the words shared by Silver Birch and the religion of Spiritualism. Their voices are heard in the pages that follow. The silence from those who did not participate begs the question, why? Has too much time passed since Maurice Barbanell died, and has their memory of him faded? Is there a discomfort in sharing opinions on Silver Birch's teachings, considering they were of their time and appear outdated today? As Spiritualist Al Batten said, "I wouldn't classify them as teachings. They were common sense...they were kind of preachy," adding that spirit guides such as Silver Birch "have their own personal opinions." Did others also believe that this spirit guide attempted to tell the world how to live when "we have no right to interfere with anybody else's life."¹⁵

Spiritualists' core beliefs, or "knowledge" as it is claimed to be based on evidence, is that the soul survives physical death and that communication with spirits is possible. This dissertation tells the story of a man who spent sixty-one years communicating with his spirit guide and the stories of mediums he supported or was associated with, owing to his intense involvement in Spiritualism. I never met Maurice Barbanell, and as a mark of respect for him and his medium colleagues, I consciously avoided using terms such as "alleged spirit communication," which brings doubt to what is reported to have been said or taken place. I cannot prove either way the veracity of the communications, and I believe it is not my place to prove or disprove any of the events I discuss. Therefore, I recount the fascinating stories in this dissertation, as they were reported to have happened. Maurice Barbanell's life is told thematically, not chronologically, to highlight the principal areas he should be most known for in his support of Spiritualists and Spiritualism alike.

¹⁵ Al Batten, Interview with Al Batten, interview by Nick Richbell, April 27, 2023.

Chapter 1 explores Maurice Barbanell's humble beginnings in East London and his discovery of Spiritualism during his late teenage years. Sitting in séances for the first time, Barbanell fell into a trance state and began channelling a spirit guide, Silver Birch, with whom he would partner for the rest of his earthly life. The séance group Barbanell sat with will be discussed, along with details about the people he sat with weekly, including his spirit guide, Silver Birch. Having found a connection with Spiritualism, Maurice Barbanell toured the United Kingdom, giving public lectures about the movement before founding the leading Spiritualist newspaper, *Psychic News*, in 1932. His role, partnerships, and disagreements will be brought to light, and some clarification will be provided on confusing reports made over the years concerning the newspaper's founding. Also, glimpses of Maurice Barbanell's personal life are revealed through brief conversations with his colleagues at *Psychic News*.

Having discussed his rapid rise within the ranks of Spiritualism, Chapter 2 will detail the many legal clashes, mostly libel cases, in which Maurice Barbanell found himself involved, both as defendant and plaintiff, over a period of twenty years. The 1930s, as we will see, were a busy time for Barbanell who used his newspaper as a platform to vigorously defend Spiritualists and Spiritualism alike. Barbanell sparred with infamous debunker of spiritualistic phenomena, Harry Price, in the pages of *Psychic News*. He also showed little remorse for exposing cases of fraud within Spiritualism. He also used his voice to support those he believed wrongly accused of dishonesty when it came to their mediumship. Maurice Barbanell was seemingly a regular in the London courts, facing off against magicians, known as conjurors at the time, who would use magic tricks to try to prove that mediumship was all faked. Used to verbal attacks, Maurice Barbanell also suffered from a physical attack by the disgruntled wife of a medium he accused of fraud.

Maurice Barbanell demonstrated his unwavering support and defence of Spiritualism through public trials in the courts of law or in his exposes in *Psychic News*. Chapter 3 further considers Barbanell's devotion to the movement by reviewing how he went against organized religion, notably the Church of England and the Roman Catholic Church. In 1937, the Archbishop of Canterbury formed a committee to report on the relationship between the Church and Spiritualism, then chose not to publish the findings when the committee's investigation concluded in 1939. Barbanell constantly challenged the Church to publish the report, often repeating how the Archbishop was withholding it owing to its favourable outlook of Spiritualism. This chapter will follow the articles and letters written as this battle played out, until Barbanell rightly or wrongly claimed that his greatest journalistic achievement was publication of a clandestine copy of the Church of England Report. A discussion follows then about Maurice Barbanell's response to a book written by a Roman Catholic priest who condemned Spiritualism. That episode in his life is yet another example of Barbanell acting as Spiritualism's public defender and showing how he could capitalize on the controversy with the publication of his own books that challenged those who denounced his religion.

Next, in Chapter 4, attention turns to Silver Birch and spirit guides. Silver Birch initially claimed to be of Indigenous American origin before proclaiming that this was not, in fact, true. The question why spirit guides so often presented themselves as Indigenous American or another racialized identity is asked and explored. Is the reason possibly because of public perception of Indigenous Americans, that made them more easily believed? Or were British mediums perpetuating the colonial stereotypes of the people who were colonized and controlled by the empire throughout history. We will then explore whether Silver Birch was only a secondary personality of Maurice Barbanell. Simply put, was Barbanell channelling his own beliefs and not those of a spirit guide? A

comparison is made between a lecture about God that Maurice Barbanell gave in 1929 and Silver Birch's teachings.

Finally, did Maurice Barbanell deserve to be called 'Mr. Spiritualism'? The Conclusion chapter will look at Barbanell's death in 1981 and the reaction from the Spiritualist community to his passing. What legacy, if any, did he leave? After his passing, Maurice Barbanell's spirit quickly communicated via mediums. This final chapter questions whether there is any truth to the appearances made by Barbanell in his discarnate form and if those people who knew the man well believed in their friend's communications from the spirit world.

This dissertation is a biographical history about the life of an individual who devoted his life to Spiritualism and who has been largely overlooked in the literature about Spiritualism. The aim is to provide readers with an insight into Maurice Barbanell's life and his contributions to Spiritualism rather than a commentary on Spiritualism itself. Spiritualists do not try to convince or persuade people to think a certain way or to believe certain things. Instead, they encourage people to listen, read, and experience the evidence themselves. Then, they can decide whether to reject or accept what they see or hear. Surveying the broader history of Spiritualism, the reader would benefit from maintaining a similarly open mind and approach to the topics discussed in this dissertation.

Chapter 1

Humble Beginnings.

In some districts every vestige of comfort had been absolutely wiped out, the foreigners coming in like an army of locusts, eating up the English inhabitants or driving them out.

Sir William Gordon Evans¹

Maurice Barbanell, born into humble beginnings in London's East End, went from a religious household with parents who held differing religious beliefs to becoming possibly the United Kingdom's most prominent propagandist of Spiritualism, eventually achieving the moniker "Mr. Spiritualism." With no biography or auto-biography available, Barbanell's beginnings, followed by his involvement with British Spiritualist organizations and the founding of a leading Spiritualist newspaper, are covered in this initial chapter.

The "foreigners" whom Sir William Evans-Gordon is referencing in 1903 are the thousands of Jewish immigrants who fled the pogroms of Eastern Europe to settle in London with the hope of providing their families with a life that anyone deserves. However, the life of the Jewish immigrant, as demonstrated in Evans-Gordon's sentiment, was anything but peaceful in their new setting of East London. Immigrants quickly settled in the areas directly surrounding the Port of London, where the ships that brought them to their new life from Hamburg docked. Evans-Gordon, a British Member of Parliament, was a member of the Government's Royal Commission on Alien Immigration and was tasked with inquiring into the "character and extent of the evils which are attributed to the

¹ Sir William Eden Evans-Gordon, *The Alien Immigrant* (New York: C. Scribner's Sons., 1903), 12.

unrestricted immigration of Aliens, especially in the Metropolis.” The “evils” that the report alleged the Jewish immigrants brought into the country included that they were poor, dirty, and employed poor sanitation. The report claimed that the immigrants included criminals and prostitutes and that they forced British people away from their areas of living as the Jews settled altogether in certain areas. Further, it was claimed that the immigrants often took work away from local citizens at a lower wage.² With regards to the Commission’s concern over the evil of the poor health and disease that Jewish immigrants brought with them, the Medical Officer of Health for the Port of London, Dr. Herbert Williams, had not reported any significant influx of infectious diseases being found amongst the immigrants. The President of the Poor Jews’ Temporary Shelter supported this claim.

Alexander I and Nicholas I restricted Jews across the Pale of Settlement, the Western area of the Russian Empire, in the nineteenth century before they could enjoy some change of residence under Alexander II. However, with his assassination in 1881, the Jews were once again placed under restrictions, which led to their fleeing the pogroms across Eastern Europe. It is unknown why the Barbanell family emigrated to England, though it could have been due to the persecution against them in their homeland of Russian Poland.³ Manel Barbanell left his wife Ryfka (later Rachel) to care for their two young children, Sophie, born in 1898, and Samuel, born in 1900, as he sailed from Hamburg to London on August 31, 1900.⁴ Ryfka, owner of a milliner’s factory in Russia, followed her husband to London in June 1901.⁵ Manel and Rachel’s third child, Morris (later Maurice), was born in the

² Henry James Hereford, “Report of the Royal Commission on Alien Immigration: With Minutes of Evidence and Appendix ...: Presented to Both Houses of Parliament by Command of His Majesty” (London: Printed for H.M. Stationery Office, by Wyman and Sons, Limited, 1903), 5–6.

³ Manel Barbanell’s brother Jehudah is believed to have emigrated to England in the 1890s; Manel may have followed his brother.

⁴ Birth and immigration dates are taken from the Brooks Family Tree on Ancestry.ca, created by Lesley Brooks, granddaughter of Manel and Rachel Barbanell.

⁵ Lesley Brooks, interview by Nick Richbell, December 12, 2022.

family home at 5 Union Street on May 3, 1902. The Barbanell home in Mile End, in London's East End, was also Manel's place of work; he was a master hairdresser. Two more children, Sarah and Esther, were born in the family home on Union Street in 1903 and 1905, respectively. The Barbanell family became naturalized citizens of England in 1906.

The United Kingdom Census 1911 reveals that the Barbanells moved from Mile End to Spitalfields, residing at 11 Bell Lane, in the heart of the Jewish district. The family home was very close to the Soup Kitchen for the Jewish Poor on Brune Lane, as well as the Jews' Free School, also on Bell Lane. Founded in 1817, it was the most prominent Jewish school in London and had 4,250 students by the time the Barbanell family moved to the area. Manel was still working as a hairdresser from the home and was able to employ an assistant, Jack Silverstone, who lodged with the family. Later in life, Maurice Barbanell was reported to have said that his childhood family home was infested with bed bugs and "on a nightly basis [the family] would get wet bars of soap to get rid of the bed bugs."⁶

By the 1921 Census, the Barbanell family (now numbering eight with the youngest daughter, Annie, born in 1915) had relocated to number 36 Bell Lane. This move enabled the family to double the number of rooms they occupied from two to four. Manel was assisted in his hairdressing work by the eldest children, Sophie and Samuel; they were still working out of the family home. Having changed his name to Maurice, Morris worked as a silk and ribbon warehouseman at Charles Clay & Sons Ltd. Sarah and Esther, aged 17 and 16 respectively, were dressmaker's assistants. Living conditions for the Jewish population of London's East End are known to have been dire. Although the

⁶ Tony Ortzen, An Audience with the President and Tony Ortzen, interview by Minister David Bruton, December 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SQqyPsxG6Oo>.

family had expanded their livable space, it is possible that their overall living conditions had not improved.⁷

Little is known about life in the Barbanell family during these early years in London. Neither Maurice during his later years, nor his brothers and sisters, spoke about their upbringing.⁸ Manel Barbanell was an atheist while his wife, Rachel, was deeply committed to her Jewish faith and “kept a Jewish house,” including raising her children within the faith.⁹ Maurice and his siblings would often hear their parents arguing over the issue of religion, with Manel consistently winning with his side of the argument, leading Maurice to follow his father, as an atheist before becoming agnostic in the years that followed.¹⁰

Although the 1921 Census records show that Morris entered his name as Maurice (and signed the Census return), he had not at that time legally changed his name. Aged 23 years, Morris Barbanell married Lily Phoebe Black, aged 24, on August 15, 1925, in a Whitechapel Register Office. Barbanell’s occupation was listed as a “hat lining manufacturer,” and his bride a “commercial clerk.” Morris’s father was also listed as a hat lining manufacturer on the wedding certificate.¹¹

As noted, Maurice Barbanell grew up atheist, later becoming agnostic, in a house that was kept Jewish. In 1920, while still a teenager, Barbanell encountered Spiritualism for the first time. As

7 For further reading about life in the East End see: Bermant, Chaim, *Point of Arrival: A Study of London’s East End* (London: Eyre Methuen, 1975); Fishman, William J., *East End Jewish Radicals, 1875-1914* (London: Gerald Duckworth & Co. Ltd., 1975); Fishman, William J., and Nicholas Breach, *The Streets of East London*. London: Gerald Duckworth & Co. Ltd., 1979); and Palmer, Alan. *The East End: Four Centuries of London Life*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2000.

⁸ Sadly, it is not uncommon for families from this generation and through and including life during World War II to simply not talk about those periods of life. In the interview with Lesley Brooks, this was confirmed to be the case for the Barbanell family.

⁹ Brooks, Interview with Lesley Brooks.

¹⁰ A.W. Austen, ed., *Teachings of Silver Birch* (Oxshott, UK: Spiritual Truth Press, 2011), 6.

¹¹ General Register Office, *Marriage Certificate of Morris Barbanell and Lily Phoebe Black*, Whitechapel, London, August 15, 1925.

the secretary for the Ghetto Social and Literary Club, Maurice always held the role of being in opposition to the invited speaker in terms of viewpoints. One evening, when Spiritualism was the subject, this worldly teenager from London's East End did not provide any opposing comments, stating that this subject required investigation before any informed comments could be made. After the debate ended, the invited speaker, Henry Sanders, asked Barbanell if he was, in fact, serious about investigating Spiritualism, to which he had no option but to carry out the investigation that he spoke of during the evening's event. Maurice Barbanell later wrote in his diary that he gave himself six months to investigate Spiritualism, believing he would only need half a year to conduct a thorough investigation.¹² Barbanell was subsequently taken to his first séance by the speaker whom he had opposed in the debate. The séance was held in the home of Mrs. Ethel Blaustein, which happened to be in a poor East End suburb of London, close to Barbanell's family home on Bell Lane. Blaustein, along with her husband Tobias, were immigrants from Galicia, and she was considered to be "the pioneer of Spiritualism among the Jews."¹³ Ethel and Tobias Blaustein were responsible for creating and leading Jewish Spiritualist Societies, including the National Jewish Spiritualists' Society founded in 1919. The Blausteins' son, also called Maurice, was responsible for responding to inquiries about the newly formed society.¹⁴ Ethel was the principal medium at the home circle that Maurice Barbanell attended, and she was known to speak in languages when in the trance state that were not otherwise familiar to her.¹⁵

¹² Austen, A.W. *Home Circle* (London: Psychic Book Club, 1940).

¹³ "Formation of Jewish Spiritualist Society," *Light*, April 26, 1919, 135.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 135.

¹⁵ See Samuel Glauber-Zimra and Boaz Huss, "'No Religion Could Be More Spiritual than Ours': Anglo-Jewish Spiritualist Societies in the Interwar Period," *Jewish Historical Studies* 53, no. 1 (March 14, 2022), <https://doi.org/10.14324/111.444.jhs.2022v53.005>.

Barbanell was not impressed by this introduction to the séance world, stating that he had “to stifle my derision when members of the home circle were supposed to be controlled by entities of different nationalities.”¹⁶ He even laughed out loud during the séance, for which he was reproached by the medium, who in trance stated that he, too, would be doing this work in the future.¹⁷ With a commitment to continue his investigation into Spiritualism, Barbanell returned to the home circle the following week.¹⁸ During this séance, only the second he attended, Maurice Barbanell fell asleep and woke up feeling embarrassed, apologizing to those present. One of the sitters close to Barbanell informed him that he had been in a trance state, and in fact, “your guide gave his name. He said that he has been training you for this for years, and soon you will be speaking on Spiritualist platforms.”¹⁹ This is when Maurice Barbanell began his sixty-one-year investigation into and journey through Spiritualism with his spirit guide, Silver Birch. Silver Birch communicated his story through Barbanell during a séance in 1938, stating that he had the choice “to return to the world of matter” to “deliver the word of the Spirit.” Agreeing to this, Silver Birch chose Barbanell as his instrument even before the medium was conceived. Silver Birch, unknown to Maurice Barbanell, worked with his medium, guiding him to study world religions until they reached the point when Barbanell “was ready for me to begin my task of speaking through his lips.”²⁰ At this point, Barbanell became aware of his spirit guide during that eventful séance in east London.²¹

¹⁶ Maurice Barbanell, *Spiritualism Today* (London: Jenkins, 1969), 116.

¹⁷ Barbanell, 116.

¹⁸ A home circle is a group of dedicated people who meet on a regular basis, often once or twice weekly, to hold a séance and bring through the spirits of those who have experienced physical death.

¹⁹ Barbanell, *Spiritualism Today*, 116.

²⁰ “Silver Birch Tells Why He Came Back. Guide’s Enthralling Account of His Mission,” *Psychic News*, January 29, 1938, 1.

²¹ See Chapter 4 for more information about Silver Birch.

Falling asleep – going into a trance – may be an unusual way for someone to discover that they are a medium, but it is not such an uncommon occurrence. The direct-voice medium, Leslie Flint, had been attending séances frequently when he, like Barbanell, fell asleep one evening. Upon waking up, Flint apologized for sleeping, adding that the room's warmth had left him feeling drowsy. Another sitter, Mr. Herbert, replied, “You were not asleep; you were in a trance. You are a natural born medium.”²² Margaret Lyon was informed that she had the ability to become a spiritual healer, and on hearing this, she regularly attended a development circle for two years. Still, nothing happened.²³ Then, having decided to give up trying, she participated in the circle for what she thought would be the last time. Seemingly waking up after having been asleep and apologizing, Lyon was informed that she, too, had not been asleep but “she had been controlled by the spirit of a Japanese woman doctor who gave the name of Kahesdee,” and this marked the beginning of Lyon’s healing work with a specialty in healing those suffering from tuberculosis, an illness that had claimed the life of Lyon’s son.²⁴

When asked about mediums discovering their mediumistic or psychic abilities this way, Rev. Karen Charles, senior pastor at The First Spiritualist Church of Galt, Ontario, said, “I think it would be wonderful to completely have my own self out of the way. Instead of siphoning and filtering and having to be part of it all.” In fact, during her early days of sitting in a circle, Rev. Charles added, “We would sit in the dark for an hour, and no one would say a word, I think, with the hope that somebody might actually fall asleep and start talking.”²⁵ The President of the Spiritualist Church of Canada, Rev. Angie Morra, described entry into working with the spirit world this way: “mediums

²² Leslie Flint, *Voices in the Dark: My Life as a Medium* (n.p.: Leslie Flint Foundation, n.d.), 42.

²³ Spiritual healing occurs when the spirit world uses someone on the earth plane as a conduit to send healing energy to someone who is sick or disabled.

²⁴ Maurice Barbanell, *Power of the Spirit* (London: Psychic Press, Ltd., 1949), 28–29.

²⁵ Rev. Karen Charles, Interview with Rev. Karen Charles, interview by Nick Richbell, November 5, 2022.

such as Maurice, Margaret, and Leslie would have been at a place where they did not hold on to those beliefs deeply. Therefore, when they could go into a meditative state, or where their soul would connect with the other side, it was not fearful for them.”²⁶ We can see from modern-day mediums that there is not just one way for someone to realize their mediumship potential and that this realization happens when the time is right.

Maurice Barbanell’s niece, Lesley Brooks, never had the opportunity to meet her uncle as the Barbanell family broke all contact with him at one point in time. The reason this happened is unknown. However, it may have occurred for one of these reasons: his Jewish mother vehemently disapproved of her son becoming a Spiritualist, or she did not approve of Maurice’s marriage to Lily Black.²⁷ Either is possible: Rachel’s youngest daughter, Annie, married outside of the Jewish faith, not only marrying a gentile but at the same time leaving Judaism behind. Her family did not speak to Annie for fifteen years.²⁸

Maurice left the family home on Bell Lane at the time of his marriage to Lily Black, moving with his new bride to Clapham Common in South London, a more gentrified area of London than where he grew up. Their only child, Derek Charles Barbanell, was born to Maurice and Lily on November 7, 1927. Over the next few years, the family moved house twice: first to Finchley, then to Golders Green, both in Northwest London, in large Jewish communities. Maurice Barbanell wrote that his “first marriage was not a success” and “[A]fter fully discussing the matter, my first wife and I decided to part. As in the case of thousands of other divorces, I “behaved like a gentleman” and supplied the necessary evidence.”²⁹ These comments were made following allegations against him by

²⁶ Rev. Angie Morra, Interview with Rev. Angie Morra, interview by Nick Richbell, November 25, 2022.

²⁷ Lily Black’s background is unknown, including if she followed the Jewish faith.

²⁸ Brooks, Interview with Lesley Brooks. Lesley said that her aunts would “speak with her mum in secret” even though they continued to keep Jewish households, thus going against their mother.

²⁹ Maurice Barbanell, “Why I Am Dropping My Libel Suit,” *Psychic News*, December 5, 1936.

the Rev. J.W. Potter, which provoked Barbanell to issue a writ for libel against Potter (subsequently dropped). Lily Barbanell filed for divorce from her husband on February 26, 1931, less than six years after their marriage. The grounds for the divorce were that Maurice, still listed as Morris in the court papers, committed adultery with an unnamed woman in April and December 1930 with the adultery having taken place in the Charing Cross Hotel and the Strand Palace Hotel, both on the Strand in Central London. Lily petitioned for sole custody of their son, and Morris and Lily Barbanell's marriage was dissolved on March 7, 1932, and Derek remained in the custody of his mother. The decree absolute was issued on September 22, 1932, and Morris was ordered to pay maintenance to his ex-wife of £6.5.0 per week. It is possible that the agreement to divorce between Maurice and Lily was that they would hire a private investigator to "catch" Maurice in an uncompromising situation with a woman and then provide that evidence in court. Divorce in the 1930s would have been difficult to carry out, and such theatrical measures needed to be taken to allow an unhappy couple to go their separate ways.³⁰

Maurice Barbanell was already in another relationship at the time of the divorce as he married for the second time on September 26, 1932, only four days after his first marriage was legally over.³¹ Barbanell's second wife, the woman with whom he spent the rest of his life with, was Sylvia Abrahams. Sylvia, four years older than her husband, had never married and had no occupation at the time of their marriage. Maurice was listed on the marriage certificate as a director of a public company, possibly a hat lining company, as he was still listed as a hat lining manufacturer in his all-too-recent divorce papers. Interestingly, in the same article Barbanell wrote against the Rev. Potter, he stated that he had never run a hat shop in London's East End. The witnesses at Maurice and

³⁰ Roy Stemman, Interview with Roy Stemman., interview by Nick Richbell, October 27, 2022.

³¹ General Register Office, *Marriage Certificate of Maurice Barbanell and Sylvia Abrahams*, Paddington, London, September 21, 1932.

Sylvia's marriage ceremony were Nettie Abrahams, G.E. Stanhope Morrison, and Hannen Swaffer, the famous Fleet Street journalist and drama critic. Swaffer, or Swaff as he was commonly known, became a Spiritualist around 1924, two years after the passing of his former boss, Lord Northcliffe, the renowned editor and founder of the *Daily Mail*, whose discarnate spirit frequented many a séance room, including those attended by Swaff.³² The newlyweds, Maurice and Sylvia Barbanell, honeymooned in the South of France.³³

Swaffer formed the Hannen Swaffer home circle, and he and Barbanell became acquainted during the mid-1920s. Swaff was already a committed spiritualist and involved with The Spiritualists' National Union (SNU), with which Barbanell also became engaged. In 1890, the Spiritualists' National Federation was formed after "a party of some sixteen spiritualists have met together at the earnest request of Mrs. Hardinge Britten, to consider a plan given to her by the spiritual guides and friends of the higher life, who have directed her world-wide travels and protected her through the unnumbered trials and experiences of her past thirty years of public spiritual propagandism."³⁴ The goal was to create a national organization to support the local spiritualist associations in the United Kingdom and to continue to promote Spiritualism. There was a need, however, to "register the Union under the Companies Act as a company limited by guarantee and not having a capital divided into shares."³⁵ Still in existence today, the Spiritualists' National Union "is a religious charity that supports Spiritualist Churches all across the United Kingdom, including the training of spiritualist healers, spiritualist mediums, public speakers and teachers."³⁶

³² For further details on Lord Northcliffe's return, see Hannen Swaffer, *My Greatest Story* (n.p.: SNU Publications, 2016), 7, and *Northcliffe's Return* (London: Psychic Book Club, 1925).

³³ Maurice Barbanell, *He Walks in Two Worlds* (New York: Caravelle Books, Inc., 1964), 45.

³⁴ "National Conference of British Spiritualists," *The Two Worlds*, July 18, 1890, 422, http://iapsop.com/archive/materials/two_worlds/two_worlds_v3_n140_18_jul_1890.pdf.

³⁵ "Spiritualists' National Union, Ltd.," *Light*, July 11, 1903, 333.

³⁶ The Spiritualists' National Union, "About Us.," accessed March 13, 2023, <https://www.snu.org.uk/about-us>.

During his formative years investigating Spiritualism, Maurice Barbanell was heavily involved in The Spiritualists' National Union activities. The SNU's annual general meeting minutes were published in their relatively short-lived monthly journal, *The National Spiritualist*. In October 1926, the minutes reported that Barbanell had followed the Union's education courses and achieved Class B (Honours). Then, the following year, Barbanell was noted as receiving Class A (Honours) in the examinations set out by the National Spiritualist College and National Joint Education Scheme. These examinations were the culmination of three years of study that led to candidates being required to write three papers based on the philosophy of Spiritualism, its evolution, and select readings about the religion and movement's history. The committee set out its strict examination rules in the *National Spiritualist*, albeit with some a degree of humour as it set out the weekend examination schedule ending with the instruction that candidates "will later read yourself to sleep with your notes on 'The Story of Creation.'" In the April 1928 issue of *The National Spiritualist*, Maurice Barbanell appears as "M. Barbanell, Dipl. S.N.U." henceforth, now a Minister of Religion, as designated by the SNU and one of the first Spiritualist ministers in the United Kingdom.³⁷ By this time, Maurice Barbanell had also been elected as Vice President of the SNU's London District Council, leading him to report in the journal each month on what he believed to be important issues occurring in London as concerned Spiritualism.

Paul Gaunt, curator and librarian of the Britten Museum and Library at the Arthur Findlay College (the United Kingdom's principal training centre for mediums), wrote that "the long, arduous work of forming a National Organization, the Spiritualists' National Federation, later the SNU, was founded on taking Spiritualism to the public in outside meetings, renting halls, etc. Speakers would travel miles, often under deplorable conditions, to propagate the truths of our religion." Spiritualists

³⁷ Maurice Barbanell, "Do the dead return?" *Liverpool Echo*, January 15, 1973.

considered this work as “propaganda,” and the Spiritualists’ National Federation ran a Propaganda Committee that did not survive the change from the Federation to the Union in 1902. Arguably, the most significant contribution that Barbanell made to the SNU and Spiritualism in his early years was his dedication to propaganda work. As a recent convert to Spiritualism, he would soon become one of the movement's greatest propagandists following in the footsteps of other prominent adherents of Spiritualism, including physicist Sir. Oliver Lodge, author Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, and the socialist writer Robert Blatchford, who were all spiritualist propagandists during the 1920s.

The long-standing friendship between Hannen Swaffer and Maurice Barbanell was cemented in two ways: 1) the Spiritualist propaganda work they undertook, including for the SNU, and 2) Barbanell’s involvement in the Hannen Swaffer home circle. Maurice Barbanell’s propaganda work on behalf of the religion of Spiritualism had begun as early as 1924, when he gave Spiritualist addresses at the Worthing Spiritualist Mission. Then, in 1925/1926, Barbanell was leading open-air meetings in Portsmouth Town Square, and a year later inviting residents to “come and question.”³⁸ The Middlesex County Times reported on September 18, 1926, that Maurice Barbanell gave an address before the Ealing Spiritualist Church stating that “[T]here should be no need for professional mediums...Everyone should learn to develop his own latent psychic powers and able to get in touch with the spirit world himself.”³⁹ It is not clear when Swaffer and Barbanell began their joint propaganda tours. However, advertisements began appearing in local British newspapers as early as 1927. The *Daily Echo* newspaper in Northampton carried small advertisements on September 18, 21, and 23, 1929, for an event titled “Spiritualism Expounded” that included a demonstration of clairvoyance.

³⁸ *The Portsmouth Evening News*, March 20, 1926, 10.

³⁹ *The Middlesex County Times*, September 18, 1926, 6.

By January 1930, the local press was reporting on the propaganda meetings conducted by the two friends. Sandwiched between an advertisement for a pantomime and a photo of a woman advertising the latest fashion, an article titled “SPIRITUALISM WILL SAVE RELIGION” recounted how Hannen Swaffer told the attendees that “he felt it was his duty to go to considerable trouble to proclaim the truth of spiritualism.” Maurice Barbanell was mentioned at the end of the article as “another speaker” who “made a protest against the law regarding mediums.”⁴⁰ Similarly, an article that was published in *The Advertiser*, on February 7, 1930, detailed the propaganda meeting that took place at the West Cliff Concert Hall in Ramsgate, Kent, that was “packed almost to capacity,” thus demonstrating the public’s appetite to learn more about Spiritualism, although the journalist did suggest that “a large section of the audience no doubt were chiefly interested in seeing on the platform one of England’s best known and most unorthodox dramatic critics [Swaffer], who was recently slapped on the face in a public restaurant by an American actress.” Swaffer, described as a better after-dinner speaker than platform orator, provided seemingly dramatic accounts of spirit manifestations while “it was left to Mr. Maurice Barbanell to give a ‘straight’ account of what spiritualism is and he did so in a most simple and direct manner.” Barbanell told the audience that they needed to come to their own conclusions about what they are being told and that “we recognize that personal experience is far more important than the most weighty pronouncements of scientists. Everything we tell you can be checked in your own home among your family and friends.”⁴¹

In the October 1931 issue of *The National Spiritualist*, Maurice Barbanell wrote, “The Union has resuscitated its Propaganda activities following the kind offer made by our Hon. President. Mr. Swaffer, who, at the annual General Meeting at Portsmouth, placed himself at the services of the

⁴⁰ *The Leicester Mail*, January 6, 1930, 6.

⁴¹ This line of thinking remains very much present in Spiritualism today. There is no creed or dogma, and people are encouraged to question what they see and hear and arrive at their own conclusions.

Union for Propaganda meetings with myself.” He then set out details of meetings already arranged “in cooperation with the local Union, Society, or District Council, and if only each Church will make a point of giving publicity to each meeting, and arrange for a strong platform for the next few weeks afterwards, the result should be to stimulate public interest in our Movement.” The first official propaganda meeting held under the auspices of The Spiritualists’ National Union was held on September 27, 1931, at the Victoria Hall in Hanley (now Stoke-on-Trent). An advertisement for the meeting ran on page 2 in the “Religious Services” column of the *Staffordshire Evening Sentinel* two days before the event, with a headline inviting people to “COME AND HEAR!!! SPIRITUALISM.” Barbanell wrote, albeit briefly, about this meeting in the November issue of *The National Spiritualist*, where he notes that almost 3,000 people were present, including the Lord Mayor elect who joined him and Swaffer on the platform and “listened most intently to our case.” Barbanell stated that the chairman of the meeting, a Justice of the Peace, was concerned that “young bloods” who wanted to disturb the meeting were in the front row. Nothing happened. Barbanell wrote, “I sometimes wonder whether we would not be better off for an occasional disturbance. To my recollection there has never been a single incident at any of our Propaganda meetings.” Maurice Barbanell showed his characteristically dry sense of humour when, at the end of the article, he wrote, “When Mr. Swaffer and I arrived at our Hotel to engage rooms for the night, the clerk enquired, “Commercials?” I looked at Mr. Swaffer and shook my head.”⁴²

After three years touring the country with Hannen Swaffer, during a propaganda tour that addressed some 250,000 people, Maurice Barbanell appears to have ended his official work with the Spiritualists’ National Union around the time of the founding of *Psychic News*.⁴³ However, that was

⁴² “S.N.U. Propaganda”, *The National Spiritualist*, November 1931.

⁴³ “His six-month quest that spanned six decades,” *Psychic News*, July 25, 1981, 4-5.

not the end of his efforts to propagandize Spiritualism. In August 1934, an article in *Psychic News* stated that the newspaper was taking the lead in Spiritualism's open-air campaign that was to take place each Sunday during the summer at 3 p.m. Maurice Barbanell was slated to be the first speaker near the "reformer's tree" in Hyde Park, in Central London. The article went on to ask, "Now, will some qualified speakers volunteer?"⁴⁴ These open-air propaganda meetings ran for three summers and would attract three- to four-hundred attendees. According to the reports in *Psychic News*, the Hyde Park campaigns were somewhat more eventful than the meetings Barbanell and Swaffer held for the SNU. Chaired by a variety of Spiritualists, including Barbanell and Harry Boddington, the meetings drew a crowd of people who knew a lot about Spiritualism and many people who knew nothing.⁴⁵ Following the talk, the crowd was invited to ask questions of the speaker. One of the early meetings resulted in the following report:

The most amusing episode during the afternoon was when an opponent took advantage of the free platform in order to attack Spiritualism—and then admitted that psychometry and clairvoyance were true! ... There were other opponents, of course. Once, a woman, pushed her way through the crowd to the front, asked a few silly questions and made some foolish remarks, stopped to eat some sweets, and then pushed her way out again.⁴⁵

Psychic News ran articles such as this after each meeting and would pay special attention to the questions the speakers were asked of the invited speakers, especially those in opposition to Spiritualism. However, by the summer of 1935, Maurice Barbanell asked, "What has happened to all the opponents of Spiritualism in Hyde Park?" Having run for seven weeks that summer, Barbanell was complaining that after he had given his talk and opened the floor to questions, "there was only

⁴⁴ "Hyde Park mission to start", *Psychic News*, August 11, 1934, 4.

⁴⁵ "In Hyde Park Again. 'Psychic News' Campaign Draws the Crowds." *Psychic News*, August 25, 1934, 3.

one critic who ventured to occupy the platform...The man who spoke in ‘opposition’ was, he admitted, a Spiritualist. His criticisms, really, were not very serious.” Barbanell went on to write: “We want opposition. We want those who oppose us to tell us where we are wrong. We welcome criticism of any kind as long as it is intelligent and serious. Spiritualists do not claim to possess all the truth, but we have a case which is founded on fact.”⁴⁶

Barbanell’s Hyde Park campaign ran for one last time the following summer, ending on September 6, 1936. As before, the public was invited to comment or pose questions about Spiritualism, and one attendee stated that “Spiritualism is a delusion” before going on to claim that Spiritualist phenomena “could all be explained by assuming that the medium read the mind of the sitter and got from it the impressions left by the ‘dead’ person when he was still in earth.”⁴⁷ Barbanell was the speaker during this last meeting. He met this critic’s statement with his usual dry style, “after complimenting the opponent on his ‘nerve’ in daring to criticize Spiritualism after such inadequate experience, pointed out that the theory put forward could not explain such phenomena as direct voice, materialisations, spirit photographs, levitation, the movement of objects or a fraction of the phenomena that prove our case.”⁴⁸ Barbanell wanted to hear opposing thoughts against Spiritualism so that he could politely, yet firmly, rebuke the critic, something Barbanell is known for throughout his years in Spiritualism

Hannen Swaffer Home Circle

Hannen Swaffer had been a Spiritualist for six years when he started his own home circle in 1930, a circle that became well known as the Hannen Swaffer Home Circle. The circle started after

⁴⁶ “Critics’ Silence in Hyde Park: The opposition fades out of sight,” *Psychic News*, August 3, 1935, 1.

⁴⁷ “Last Meeting at Hyde Park: Critic opposes us after one séance,” *Psychic News*, September 12, 1936.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

Swaff had taken a friend, a woman singer who trained under Enrico Caruso and who had performed in Puccini's *Madame Butterfly*, to a demonstration of mediumship performed by Estelle Roberts.⁴⁹ The friend, whose name was never revealed but was believed to have acted in Puccini's opera *Madame Butterfly*, told Swaff that she saw spirits on the platform around Roberts, and it became evident that this woman had been living a life of clairsaudience and clairvoyance, and had alarmed her friend Swaff by revealing that she had been sitting with her husband and sister, but in a haphazard way with no spirit guide working with them. Swaff, perturbed by this revelation, cautioned his friend of the dangers of working without a spirit guide. Upon hearing this warning, Swaff reported that his friend "saw immediately a very tall Red Indian who gave his name as White Shadow, said he had been sent by Abdul Latif, and explained that he was to take the circle under his control."⁵⁰

The slow months that followed saw the medium develop from being only clairsaudient and clairvoyant to being prepared to become a trance medium.⁵¹ Not dissimilar to Maurice Barbanell's, and others, entry into trance mediumship, this woman fell asleep one evening and her spirit guide

⁴⁹ Estelle Roberts was described by Hannen Swaffer "as the most versatile British medium of her time," she regularly gave public demonstrations of mediumship in large venues such as the Royal Albert Hall and Queen's Hall, London. Roberts and Maurice Barbanell became great friends, and he published several books that included details of her trance channelling with her spirit guide, Red Cloud, including *The Trumpet Shall Sound* (London: Rider, 1933; Oxshott, UK: The Spiritual Truth Press, 2020) while his wife, Sylvia, published *Some Discern Spirits* (London: Psychic Book Club, 1944; Oxshott, UK: The Spiritual Truth Press, 2019), also based on the mediumship of Estelle Roberts.

⁵⁰ Hannen Swaffer, "A Home Circle I Know," *Psychic News*, June 4, 1932.

⁵¹ Generally, there are three types of medium: mental, physical, and trance. A mental medium will typically receive messages from the spirit world via one of the "clairs": clairsaudience (hearing), clairvoyance (seeing), clairsentience (feeling), clairgustance (tasting), clairalience (smelling), and claircognizance (knowing). The medium will receive information through one or more of these ways and then share that with the sitter. A physical medium can work with spirit energy to help, for example, items to independently move around a séance room or appear seemingly from out of nowhere in the séance room. A trance medium will fall into a hypnotic state and then channel the words of a spirit, often the medium's spirit guide. Other forms of mediumship, greatly less practiced today, include direct-voice mediums that can bring forward the voices of spirits independent from the medium's body, notably through a spirit trumpet. A spirit trumpet is a conical, aluminum tool that was popular in the 1920s and 1930s and allowed for the voices of spirits to be amplified and heard in the séance room.

began to control her. Over time a variety of spirits took control of this woman and even the spirit of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle would visit this home circle. Between the start of the Hannen Swaffer home circle in 1930 and 1932, Maurice Barbanell had joined the circle and his guide, Silver Birch, would work alongside White Shadow whose medium was developing a variety of physical phenomena including communicating through direct voice and the movement of spirit trumpets around the séance room. A.W. Austen reports in his book, *Home Circle*, that Silver Birch gradually took over as the teacher of the home circle. Austen explains that this circle was successful as “all the sitters and their guides had been carefully chosen by the spirit people. For over two years they had been working for a perfect circle, one in which all the sitters and all the guides would blend in harmony. At last, they were satisfied they had got it.”⁵² The phenomena grew over time with trumpets whizzing around the room, to a hand being materialized, to a visit by the spirit of the German actress, Anny Ahlers, who wanted to share with the circle that she did not die by suicide, but that her fall from the balcony of her home was simply an accident. The phenomena experienced at the home circle was outstanding, “[T]o this circle we would have begun inviting all kinds of hard-boiled investigators. For it was fool proof...But, alas, there was a silly argument one night. The “conditions” were disturbed. We had to stop sitting.” A new Hannen Swaffer home circle was formed. Silver Birch was now the chief guide.⁵³

The Hannen Swaffer home circle went on to meet every Friday evening, except for some weeks during the summer months when the guide took a break, at the home of Maurice and Sylvia Barbanell at number 8, Adelaide Court, in St. John’s Wood, northwest London. The Barbanells shared this modest two-bedroom, first-floor, rent-controlled apartment with a housekeeper. A spirit portrait of Silver Birch by the artist Marcel Poncin was hung between the two windows in the sitting

⁵² A.W. Austen, *Home Circle* (London: Psychic Book Club, 1940), 14.

⁵³ Swaffer, *My Greatest Story*, 85.

room.⁵⁴ The home circle, which sat in this room each week and watched over by the spirit guide in the painting, were Maurice (the channel for Silver Birch), his wife Sylvia, A.W. (Billy) Austen, Vernon Moore, an ex-Methodist missionary, his wife Frances, Nettie Abrahams (a relative of Sylvia who was a witness at the Barbanell's wedding), and George and Rene Jessop.⁵⁵ As a member of the home circle for almost eight years, A.W. Austen was responsible for recording the words of Silver Birch in shorthand. Initially, this was challenging owing to the séances being held in darkness until it was suggested that Austen use a raised notepaper (as used by the visually impaired) that allowed him to follow each line without overrunning the page.

Maurice Barbanell's wife, Sylvia, was born in East London on December 29, 1897. Described as "the greatest source of his [Maurice's] inspiration and energy," Sylvia was always in attendance at the séances held in her modest apartment. She sat on the couch next to her husband as he went into a trance.⁵⁶ Sylvia was a writer and her articles occasionally appeared in print in *Psychic News* and were often concerned with women's or animal rights. Sylvia Barbanell also authored books about what happens when a child or animal dies.⁵⁷ A family friend noted that Sylvia had "created an oasis of peace for her tireless husband," and that the Barbanell marriage was "the perfect counterfoil to his hectic public life."⁵⁸

⁵⁴ According to the article, "Guide Tells Medium Psychic Artist Has Painted His Picture" that appeared in *Psychic News* on September 6, 1941, Poncin painted the Silver Birch clairvoyantly around 1938. Poncin was also responsible for painting other spirit guides including "Poppet", guide of Lillian Bailey, "Rosie", guide of Bertha Harris, and "Red Cloud", the infamous spirit guide of Estelle Roberts.

⁵⁵ Information about the Barbanell home from: Ortzen, An Audience with the President and Tony Ortzen.

⁵⁶ Edmund Bentley, *These Chariots of Fire: The Autobiography of a Seeker* (London: Regency Press, 1959), 111.

⁵⁷ See Sylvia Barbanell, *When Your Animal Dies*, 10th impression (Oxshott, UK: Spiritual Truth Press, 2001), and Sylvia Barbanell, *When a Child Dies* (Leatherhead, UK: Spiritual Truth Press, 2020).

⁵⁸ Bentley, *These Chariots of Fire*, 111–12.

Vernon Moore was once known as “The Searcher” to the readers of *Psychic News*. Moore, a non-believer in Spiritualism, was challenged by Hannen Swaffer that “there are the facts if you wish to investigate them,” thus provoking this Christian man to begin his investigation into Spiritualism. His reports were published in *Psychic News*, from time to time, with Moore stating, “[I]f Spiritualism is true and the fact of Survival is demonstrable, I believe it to be the most amazing discovery that can be made.”⁵⁹ Frances Moore played a vital role in the Hannen Swaffer home circle for forty years. After Austen left the circle, Frances became the home circle’s stenographer, dutifully taking down Silver Birch’s words so they could be shared with the readers of *Psychic News* and beyond.⁶⁰ Soon after, Hannen Swaffer reported that Vernon Moore stated, “Spiritualism is true!” This led Swaff to respond, “You are sacked! You are not a searcher but a finder. I wanted a real sceptic, one who could last out for a year.” “The Searcher” was no more. Vernon Moore became a well-known spiritual healer and propagandist of Spiritualism and was responsible for audio recording the events of the Hannen Swaffer home circle.⁶¹

Nettie Abrahams was a long-standing member of the home circle. The relationship between Nettie and Sylvia was never revealed, and she was rumoured to have been a niece or, more likely, a cousin. Nettie was a lifelong spinster who lived with her brother Sonny and her sister-in-law in their Maida Vale apartment, close to Maurice and Sylvia’s residence in St. John’s Wood. Nettie’s father, Isaac, was a fur dealer who emigrated from Russia, and her mother, Bertha, was German. The 1921 Census shows that Nettie, aged nine, lived with her parents, her older sister Millie, and younger brother Louis, in an eight-room house at 141 Graham Road in Hackney, East London. Also present in

⁵⁹ The Searcher, “Missionary to Test Our Case,” *Psychic News*, September 2, 1933, 11.

⁶⁰ Frances Moore died on May 7, 2002. *Psychic News* commented in the May 25, 2002, issue, “Perhaps the date of Ms Moore’s passage to spirit points to an extra special reception, as another anniversary had just been celebrated – the centenary of the earthly birthday of Maurice Barbanell, born on May 3, 1902.”

⁶¹ Swaffer, *My Greatest Story*, 94.

the home was a visitor from Russia, Edith Bloch, along with the servant, Emma Rixon. In stark contrast to her father's profession, Nettie was an animal lover. She took care of feeding the stray cats living near the offices of *Psychic News*, even going so far as to travel to the office on the weekend and public holidays to attend to the cats. Although involved in Spiritualism since the early days of the Hannen Swaffer home circle, Nettie did not work start to work for Spiritualism until 1962 after the death of her mother: Nettie volunteered to help Maurice Barbanell with office work at *Two Worlds* following a staffing crisis and then moved to *Psychic News* where she operated the switchboard and became known as the welcoming voice of the newspaper to all who called. Nettie passed away in 1973, the first member of Hannen Swaffer's home circle to die.⁶²

In the early years, the fact that Maurice Barbanell was Silver Birch's channel was a secret maintained by the members of, and visitors to, the Hannen Swaffer home circle. Barbanell agreed to publish details about the home circle and the teachings of Silver Birch in *Psychic News* if he would not be revealed as being the medium. In 1935, *Psychic News* invited readers to submit questions to Silver Birch, and as with all articles featuring the spirit guide, no mention was made of Maurice Barbanell. Instead, readers were asked to send in their questions if they were sincere, and the newspaper stated that it had "made arrangements to ensure that the medium used by this guide will not see the questions asked."⁶³ As the editor of a Spiritualist newspaper, Barbanell was concerned that there "would be criticism that publication would flatter my vanity. I will leave my name out and let the spirit teachings stand or fall on their own merit." The teachings of Silver Birch were shared in the newspaper, as well as in books compiled by Barbanell's *Psychic News* and Hannen Swaffer home

⁶² Maurice Barbanell, "'Our Nettie' Is Reunited with Loved Ones in the Beyond," *Psychic News*, November 3, 1973, 5.

⁶³ "Guide Will Answer Your Queries. 'Psychic News' Starts a New Feature," *Psychic News*, September 28, 1935, 5.

circle colleagues, including journalist and editor A.W. Austen and journalist Stella Storm,⁶⁴ By August 1957, the teachings had been published in seven books as well as numerous issues of the newspaper. Barbanell wrote that “the teachings have won through on their own merits. There is, therefore, no longer any need for anonymity. Besides, being very frank by nature, I dislike secrecy.”⁶⁵ However, the secret was maintained for thirty-seven years (1920-1957).

Membership of the Hannen Swaffer home circle would be augmented each week as Silver Birch would invite others to join, adding one or two people to the group meeting in the St. Johns Wood apartment. Roy Stemman had been working at *Psychic News* for two years when he was tasked with travelling around Great Britain and writing a series of reports on different aspects of Spiritualism for the newspaper. Evidently, Maurice Barbanell, or Silver Birch, thought that a visit to the home circle was in order, and Stemman was invited to attend one Friday evening.⁶⁶ Never expecting to receive such an invitation, Stemman was happy to accept, even though he did not hold a great deal of interest in it. On arriving, Stemman noted, “It was a convivial atmosphere. Everybody sort of knew everybody and made any visitor welcome. Barbie, the name by which Maurice Barbanell was known to his close friends and family, was very relaxed. When it was time for Silver Birch to be channelled, he would sit on a sofa. Sylvia sat next to him...They all went quiet for a minute or two. Suddenly, Silver Birch was there. There was nothing dramatic about it.”⁶⁷ Another *Psychic News* employee, Tony Ortzen, said, “Maurice would take off his glasses, he would look down, and all the guests would

⁶⁴ Austen, *Teachings of Silver Birch*; Silver Birch, Stella Storm, and Maurice Barbanell, *Philosophy of Silver Birch* (Oxshott, UK: Spiritual Truth Press, 1998).

⁶⁵ Maurice Barbanell, “Who is Silver Birch’s medium?” *Two Worlds*, August 24, 1957, 3.

⁶⁶ With time, it can be challenging to remember exactly when meetings or events transpired. This explains the somewhat murky timeline here.

⁶⁷ Stemman, Interview with Roy Stemman.

continue chatting, and all of a sudden he would look up slightly and Silver Birch would suddenly speak and give the most beautiful greeting.”⁶⁸

Maurice Barbanell was a successful businessman for a few years, holding company directorships, as the proprietor of his own company, and owning several properties. Then, by the time of the Great Depression in 1931, Barbanell’s success fell apart just like his first marriage, and he was forced to close the business he owned, reducing his income to only one directorship. At this time, Hannen Swaffer’s business manager, J.M. Rubens, approached Barbanell and Swaff to provide some editorial support to a psychic publication being considered. Nothing came of this venture. However, Rubens, who was helping Barbanell wrap up his business affairs, then suggested to Barbanell that he start his own paper, partly financed from the sale of some shares and that the paper would report on Spiritualism. Rubens, a non-believer in psychic phenomena, even offered to help fund the venture. All this happened, one evening at Swaffer’s Central London apartment.⁶⁹ Barbanell wrote that he was startled at the suggestion, however, he “recalled a séance with Alfred Vout Peters at which his guide said—and I am quoting from my notes made at the time— ‘W.T. Stead is interested in you. You have a journalistic urge in your fingers. Cultivate your writing powers. Later on, you are going to do writing work; I see the association with Hannen Swaffer. You will contribute to the newspapers. Try to make your writing short and crisp.’”⁷⁰ Shortly before the Peters séance, Barbanell was sitting in an Estelle Roberts séance. Roberts’ spirit guide, Red Cloud, said to Maurice: “We have plenty for you to

⁶⁸ Ortzen, *An Audience with the President and Tony Ortzen*.

⁶⁹ Tom Driberg, “Swaff”: *The Life and Times of Hannen Swaffer* (London: Macdonald & Jane’s, 1974), 128. W.T. Stead is an essential figure within the context of Spiritualism and home circles. A journalist and Spiritualist, Stead died when the Titanic sank in 1912. After his passing, Stead communicated what happened to the passengers on the Titanic and how all those who perished transitioned to the next world in *The Blue Island, Experiences of a New Arrival Beyond the Veil* (London: 1922). This account was communicated through the automatic writing of the medium, Pardoe Woodman. Since his passing, Stead has appeared in numerous home circles worldwide, including that of Thomas Lacey, the British-born, Kitchener, Ontario-based medium.

⁷⁰ Maurice Barbanell, “Three ‘Dead’ Men Began Psychic News,” *Psychic News*, May 20, 1939, 2.

do. Our plans are already made. They only have to materialise in your world. You are going forward to do a bigger work.”⁷¹

“I knew I was being asked to make the biggest decision of my life,” Barbanell wrote. At the age of thirty, a businessman with no experience in journalism, except for his friendship with Hannen Swaffer, Barbanell had reservations concerning the news delivered to him by Red Cloud, a spirit guide of whom Barbanell was both fond and whose words he believed in. Barbanell “decided that on so important a matter,” he “required confirmation.” To help with this significant life change, Barbanell sought out a medium who did not know him (a challenge considering his positions within the Spiritualists’ National Union and his large-scale propaganda tours), but he soon met Kathleen Barkel. At that time, Barkel had worked mostly worked in the privacy of her own home with her spirit guide, White Hawk, who told Barbanell that everything was ready for a psychic newspaper to be launched and that Barbanell, “must accept that proposal.” Lord Northcliffe, Swaff’s former boss in the spirit world, also appeared at the séance with Barkel, apparently causing Barbanell’s fountain pen to leak in the medium’s hands. This accident was a demonstration of Northcliffe’s dissatisfaction with the current state of psychic journalism; White Hawk told Barbanell that the deceased master of Fleet Street had come “in connection to the newspaper and he says, ‘Go ahead with it.’” Hence, with the encouragement of three “dead” men – two spirit guides and one former newspaper editor – Barbanell decided to devote the rest of his life to informing the public about Spiritualism.⁷² J.M. Rubens, Barbanell, and Swaff were to invest £1,000 each in the founding of this paper. However, Swaff withdrew his financial support at the last minute, saying, “If it’s a success, they’ll say I’m making

⁷¹ Barbanell, 2.

⁷² Maurice Barbanell may have been better suited to writing of four ‘dead’ men being responsible for the founding of *Psychic News*. As noted, the spirit of W.T. Stead was also involved “behind the scenes” in prophesizing that this work would take place.

money out of Spiritualism.”⁷³ This left the initial investment of £666 13S 4d between Rubens and Barbanell, the latter having to borrow his half from a friend owing to the precarious financial situation that he was faced with. *Psychic News*, named by Swaffer, was launched on May 28, 1932. Before the launch, Red Cloud, working from the spirit world with others, told Barbanell that the paper had to be bright, fearless, stand for the truth, and, above all, “print the evidence for Survival.” The first edition did not fail to carry out Red Cloud’s advice: the leading headline was “I CHALLENGE THE ‘DAILY MAIL’” and the article written by Swaff was a direct challenge to the Daily Mail over the accusations of fraud they printed against a well-known London medium.

It has been often reported that James Arthur Findlay (commonly known as J. Arthur or Arthur) was also responsible for founding *Psychic News*. However, this is not the case. A successful businessman from Scotland, J. Arthur Findlay, became involved in Spiritualism around 1919 when he met a fellow Glaswegian, John C. Sloan. In his 1931 book, *On the Edge of the Etheric*, Findlay claimed that Sloan was “one of the most gifted mediums in this country, and in his presence, when the conditions were suitable, voices quite extraneous to the medium spoke to me claiming to be those of friends who, in my ignorance, I had looked on as dead.”⁷⁴ By May 1932, Findlay’s book had been re-printed no less than nineteen times. One week after the launch of *Psychic News* and having seen the great success of Findlay’s work, Maurice Barbanell wrote to him asking if he would consider writing an article for the newly established newspaper. When Findlay and Barbanell met, it became apparent to Findlay that this new publishing venture needed financial support to continue publishing. J. Arthur Findlay provided this much-needed support, and Psychic Press Ltd, a publishing company,

⁷³ Driberg, *Swaff*, 128.

⁷⁴ James Arthur Findlay, *On the Edge of the Etheric or Survival after Death Scientifically Explained*, Twenty-seventh impression (London: Rider & Co, 1932), 10.

was formed with Findlay as chairman. Barbanell, the editor, and Rubens both received shares, as did Findlay, who also controlled the company.⁷⁵

The first years of publishing were financially tricky for *Psychic News*: Findlay continued to “pay out thousands to keep it going, but [he] never lost faith in the venture, especially as I had in Barbanell an able, hard-working, and enthusiastic editor.” The newspaper eventually became able to support itself financially, becoming, according to Findlay, “the best known of all the Spiritualist newspapers, with the largest circulation.”⁷⁶

All appeared to be well between Maurice Barbanell and J. Arthur Findlay until the March 23, 1946, edition of *Psychic News* with the appearance of the following note on page 4: “The Directors of Psychic Press Limited announce with regret that Mr. Maurice Barbanell has resigned his editorship of ‘Psychic News.’ Mr. Stuart Martin has been appointed in his place.”

Findlay did not respond to this seemingly surprising resignation and stated that “he [Barbanell] would not yield to my persuasion that he should remain,” and a new editor was sought.⁷⁷ Stuart Martin was appointed as editor of *Psychic News*, however, following his untimely death in January 1947, Findlay appointed A.W. Austen to the role which he held until he emigrated to Australia with his wife and mother-in-law. It was not until after Barbanell died that what happened between him and Findlay was revealed. People knew, or at best suspected, that there had been a disagreement and a falling-out between the two men, and it was Barbanell himself who, in his self-written obituary, told the world what happened. A year before he resigned, Barbanell approached his friend and colleague, J. Arthur Findlay, to ask “what would happen to his PN [*Psychic News*] shares

⁷⁵ James Arthur Findlay, *Looking Back The Autobiography of a Spiritualist* (London: Psychic Press, Ltd., 1955), 308–309.

⁷⁶ Findlay, 308–309.

⁷⁷ Findlay, 422.

in the event of his passing. I pointed out that, I being younger than he, it would be fair to assume he would pass before I did. His reply astounded me.”⁷⁸ Findlay informed Barbanell that he intended to leave his home, Stansted Hall, as well as his shares in the newspaper to the Spiritualists’ National Union with the intention that the SNU rename the home to “Arthur Findlay College” and create a training ground where mediums could pay to be trained in their gifts. Barbanell’s astonishment came from his belief that mediums would not pay for this training as “any potential mediums could be developed without fee in a home circle.”⁷⁹ Furthermore, Maurice Barbanell strongly believed that the shares should go to him because the newspaper’s success was because of his own hard work.. After considering Barbanell’s opposition to his plan, Findlay offered to sell his shares to Barbanell for the sum of £8,000, and he gave his editor seven days to complete the sale. Barbanell, obviously outraged, could not meet this offer, and would not have paid that price if he could have. He gave twelve months’ notice to allow a new editor to be found.

For sixteen years following his resignation from his beloved newspaper, Maurice Barbanell took over the editorship of the rival Spiritualist newspaper, *Two Worlds*, before returning to *Psychic News*, the newspaper he founded thirty-one-years before, on June 20, 1962.⁸⁰ In the same article published after his death, Barbanell detailed the poor state of the newspaper, both physically in terms of the office space used and financially. Between his departure and his return, he declared, “[T]he situation had so deteriorated that the directors should not have continued to trade because the company was insolvent.”⁸¹ The newspaper, much as it was founded on the advice of the spirit world,

⁷⁸ Maurice Barbanell, “How the Editor Saved PN from Financial Ruin,” *Psychic News*, July 25, 1981, 5.

⁷⁹ Barbanell, 5.

⁸⁰ *The Two Worlds, a journal devoted to Spiritualism, Occult Science, Ethics, Religion and Reform*, was founded by the Spiritualist trance medium Emma Hardinge Britten in 1887 and was published weekly. *Psychic News* became its primary competitor upon its founding.

⁸¹ Barbanell, “How the Editor Saved PN from Financial Ruin,” 4–5.

was also apparently saved from financial troubles by the spirit world, particularly with the advice given by Estelle Roberts' spirit guide, *Red Cloud*. The shares in *Psychic News* that The Spiritualist's National Union held were acquired, at no cost to the newspaper, and put into the newly-formed Spiritual Truth Foundation. Shares in Psychic Press Ltd were also transferred to the Foundation, and *Psychic News* has continued ever since.

Maurice Barbanell was now firmly back at the helm of the newspaper he loved. At this time, Barbanell was the speaker at the Independent Psychic Group's propaganda meeting to promote Spiritualism; Stanley Poulton was the medium who was giving a demonstration of mediumship. Roy Stemman, working as a freelance reporter, was asked by the then editor of *Psychic News*, Bill Neech, to attend the meeting to report on it for the newspaper. Stemman had been attending many demonstrations and talks such as this one and agreed. Stemman knew that Poulton was a brilliant medium. However, although he knew Maurice Barbanell by name, he had never met or heard him talk, and after hearing Barbanell talk about a recent visit to the Holy Land, Stemman was unimpressed: "It was a little bit boring. I think it was called 'Following in the Footsteps of Jesus' or something."⁸² Making notes throughout the demonstration of mediumship and the lecture, Stemman looked for recipients of Poulton's messages after the meeting ended, when Barbanell approached Roy, clearly knowing who he was and asked about the report Stemman was writing. Stemman, with the courage of youth, was unimpressed with Barbanell's impertinence and unknowingly told the editor of the rival newspaper, "you'll have to wait till next week when *Psychic News* comes out and then you'll know, won't you!" Barbanell smiled, and the encounter between the two men ended.⁸³

⁸² Stemman, Interview with Roy Stemman.

⁸³ Stemman.

With the meeting report in hand, Roy Stemman went to the office of *Psychic News* on Great Queen Street in Holborn, where he would usually leave his work with the bookshop manager to submit to the editor. On this occasion, he was informed that Bill Neech was no longer the editor and Maurice Barbanell was back. Stemman's initial reaction was not to submit the report with its criticisms of Barbanell. However, he did and thought that he would never work for the newspaper again. Stemman's report, "Poulton's proofs were good-but where was his usual punch?" was published in the June 30 edition of the newspaper, only ten days after Barbanell resumed editorship, and included, according to Stemman, Barbanell's sense of humour as he had added some his own jokes to the report. Again, Stemman thought his time at *Psychic News* had ended, but he was wrong. Maurice Barbanell contacted Stemman a couple of months after this report was published, asking to meet with him, to which he agreed. Stemman reported that as he was heading to the office, he encountered a *Psychic News* reporter, Molly Blake. On learning whom he was meeting, Blake advised Stemman that if Barbanell were going to ask Roy to join the newspaper, he would also be asked how much money he was currently earning and that his reply should add a couple of extra pounds to the amount because the editor would not offer more than you were presently earning. "That's exactly what happened," said Stemman. "I went to the office; he invited me in. I'd been to the opening of a men's outfitters shop; I was working for a journal that covered men's outfitting. We'd had a cocktail or two to celebrate the opening, and then I went down for my appointment. I think Barbie, who was a teetotaller, probably noticed I'd had a drink or two and suggested I might want to sit down before I fell down!" Stemman added a couple of extra pounds to what he was earning at *The Outfitter* to which Barbanell replied, "that's the highest I could go to, I'm afraid." Stemman was now a permanent *Psychic News* employee.

Roy Stemman described Maurice Barbanell as a short man with quite a dark complexion, and by the time he started working at the newspaper, Barbanell's hair was already turning white with age (he would have been around sixty years old). Another of Barbanell's friends described him as an "enigma" and a "rather sallow man" with "a smile that is ever ready to flash out, as his sense of the ridiculous equals his sense of humour."⁸⁴ The *Psychic News* office was "a friendly atmosphere to work in." However, it was a smoky atmosphere: Maurice Barbanell chain-smoked Havana cigars, and he was frequently seen "lighting a cigar from the stub of the cigar" he was finishing. Stemman, Barbanell's secretary Betty Macintosh, and a *Psychic News* reporter Stella Storm, all smoked Hamlet cigars in the office, leaving Roy to feel sorry for visitors that "reeked of cigar smoke." The office was a busy place, and Barbanell was "running the show... The accountant was having to come up and talk about things. He [Barbanell] was publishing books. He was getting manuscripts coming in. It was a pretty hectic affair." Yet, Barbanell was "not treated as the boss, although he was the boss... if anybody did something wrong, they would know about it."⁸⁵

The issues of *Psychic News* were created in central London, and were printed weekly in Colchester, Essex, about one hour's train ride away. Roy Stemman would usually travel with Maurice Barbanell on press day, and they would go through the week's proofs on the train and deliver them to the printer before returning to London. "That was a really good time to get to know him personally," said Stemman, "he would chat very affably about things that were going on... He loved to tell stories about some of the early Spiritualists and people that he knew, and some of the mediums he had worked with. One or two of the people that he had exposed as fraud."⁸⁶ One of Stemman's tasks as

⁸⁴ Bentley, *These Chariots of Fire: The Autobiography of a Seeker*, 108.

⁸⁵ Stemman, Interview with Roy Stemman.

⁸⁶ Barbanell claimed to have attended thousands of séances (power of the spirit?) and if the evidence produced ever appeared to be fraudulent, Roy Stemman stated that "he was quite ready to publish any accusation of fraud

Assistant Editor at *Psychic News* was to open all the mail that was addressed to either himself or to Barbanell, even those envelopes marked as “private and confidential.” “I opened all the letters,” said Stemman. “I was told that nothing was private. If it was marked private, it was somebody looking for something...you open everything.” Then one morning, a letter arrived for Barbanell that said: “Dear Mr. Barbanell, I am your son.” Roy Stemman wasn’t necessarily surprised as it was not unusual to receive odd letters. When, as was typical, he took the mail to his boss, he left this letter until the end and said, “this letter here, I said it’s from someone claiming to be your son,” to which Barbanell responded, “Oh goodness me. Ah, yes. Yes, it’s my son.” I haven’t heard from him or been in touch with him for a long time.” Stemman said that a telephone call took place later that day between Barbanell and his son, Derek, as Barbanell was known to be quite loud on the telephone, even with a door closed. Stemman was then introduced to Derek a few weeks later when he arrived at the *Psychic News* office to go for lunch with his father. Derek was never mentioned to Stemman again.⁸⁷

Roy Stemman had been working closely with Maurice Barbanell for about eight years when, at the end of 1969, Muriel McKay was kidnapped from the family home in Wimbledon, London. McKay was married to a newspaper executive from Rupert Murdoch’s *News of the World*. Stemman said that the newspaper brought in the famous Dutch psychic, Gerard Croiset, to help find the missing woman. *Psychic News* was approached to request that Maurice Barbanell give an interview. Stemman said that as Barbanell did not enjoy giving radio interviews, the task was delegated to him, and a short piece was broadcast on the evening news. This interview sparked a request from Paul Beard, the

against the medium where there was strong evidence.” This is investigated in Chapter 2, including the libel and legal cases in which Barbanell was directly and indirectly involved.

⁸⁷ Stemman, Interview with Roy Stemman. Companies House shows that Derek Barbanell held directorships in Ipswich, England. His wife, Ann, passed away in 2013, and Derek passed away in 2020. Derek and Ann were members of the Suffolk Inter-Faith Resource (SIFRE) group in Suffolk, England. SIFRE encouraged “people of different faiths to meet, share their traditions and promote mutual understanding.”, <https://www.sifre.org.uk>. Accessed March 16, 2023.

President of The College of Psychic Studies, that Stemman give a talk at the college about the use of psychic abilities in locating missing people. Stemman agreed.

Some months later parts of Stemman's talk were published in *Light*, a journal of Spiritualism and psychical research. Maurice Barbanell, according to Stemman, was not happy. Called into his boss's office, Stemman was told that this article was against the editorial policy of *Psychic News*. Stemman was baffled, "well, it wasn't an article, but it was a speech that someone's put together. What's the policy?" Barbanell's response was that mediumship is for proving life after death and is not meant for anything else, especially not for solving crimes. Knowing that no such editorial policy existed in writing, he asked his boss to see it and was met with the negative. Fully believing that he should have the right to speak on any subject providing that he stated the views were his own and not those of the company he worked for, Stemman went to the chairman of *Psychic News*, Percy Wilson, but received no support. Upset and with the impatience of youth, Roy Stemman resigned from his job and had to work a six-month notice period, having recently successfully negotiated a six-month contract considering the times he was responsible for the newspaper when Maurice and Sylvia Barbanell took vacations. "I'd actually dug a rather deep hole for myself," said Stemman. "He [Barbanell] and I worked together for six months after I gave notice. It was okay. It was alright. He never made any overtures about trying to keep me on." This was a sad ending of Stemman's time working with Maurice Barbanell. When the six-months' notice period was up, Stemman was upset on his last day in the office: "I was still tidying up my desk when he came out of the office with his bag... He just said, 'Good Night'. He didn't say 'I wish you well' or 'good luck'... Anyway, he was the boss, he could do anything he liked, so we left on rather a bad note, I'm afraid."⁸⁸ Roy Stemman

⁸⁸ Stemman.

left and continued a very successful career in journalism and the two men never spoke to one another again.

Having discovered Spiritualism in his teenage years, Maurice Barbanell quickly became one of the religion's most outspoken and ardent supporters. Yet, according to those who knew him, Barbanell "never self-promoted himself in any way." His actions, whether in a propaganda meeting or responding to critics in the printed press, were never meant to help sell books. Maurice Barbanell worked tirelessly "to make people aware that Spiritualism had a lot more going for it than the newspapers might have suggested."⁸⁹ This man, who was not afraid to voice his opinion or stand up against the criticism that Spiritualism so often received, spent much time fighting, or attempting to fight some of the critics, including sometimes pursuing them through the British legal system, as we shall explore in Chapter 2.

⁸⁹ Stemman.

Chapter 2

Fraud, Libel, Magic Tricks, and the Law.

The history of spiritualism is a history of fraud, and hundreds of fakers have been exposed; some confessed, a few have been convicted.

-Harry Price¹

Spiritualism has faced accusations of fraudulent activities since the movement began in 1848. The gavel of justice has fallen on both sides: there has been proven evidence of fraud, and there have been cases where the mediumship has been genuine. The originators of Modern Spiritualism, Kate, and Maggie Fox were not immune to accusations of fraud. Along with their elder sister Leah, the Fox sisters were accused of cracking bones to make the noise of the rappings that were reported to be from the dead man buried in the basement of the family home. Barbara Weisberg covered the history of the Fox family, including how, in 1888, both Kate and Maggie Fox attacked their elder sister Leah in the press for her exploitation of the young girls as they travelled across the United States and to England to perform séances. Kate and Maggie both denounced Spiritualism and confessed their fraudulent part.²

Spiritualism arrived in the United Kingdom in 1853 with the American medium Mrs. Maria B. Hayden. Accusations of fraud followed soon after, including about Hayden's

¹ Harry Price, "Something Wrong with Spiritualists, Fake 'Mediums' Screened," *Sheffield Telegraph*, March 12, 1938.

² Barbara Weisberg, *Talking to the Dead: Kate and Maggie Fox and the Rise of Spiritualism* (New York: Harper Collins, 2005), 241-249.

mediumship.³ In her authoritative work, *The Darkened Room: Women, Power, and Spiritualism in Late Victorian England*, Alex Owen wrote that “nearly all major mediums of the period were detected in fraud during the course of their careers.”⁴ Owen detailed how suspicions about the young medium, Florence Cook, led to what she labelled “spirit grabbing.” In 1873, a male séance sitter, Mr. Volckman, physically grabbed Cook as she materialized the full-form body of the spirit of Katie King to prove the medium acted fraudulently. This event caused “outrage,” and Mr. Volckman defended himself by stating “that the *struggling* ghost had to be forcibly extricated from my grasp, and afterwards to be ‘aided’ into her cabinet by a Justice of the Peace.”⁵ Volckman subsequently married another medium, Mrs. Guppy, who was known to be jealous of Florence Cook, thus suggesting collusion in the attack on Cook. Owen provided further examples of fraud in the Victorian séance room, including that of another female medium who was also physically grabbed by a sitter, only then to be found on the floor partially dressed.⁶

Female mediums were not the only targets for accusations of fraud. D.D. (Daniel Dunglass) Home was one of the most famous mediums of the nineteenth century. In Home’s séances, “such phenomena as full-form phantoms, levitations, handling live coals and the

³ Ruth Brandon, *The Spiritualists: The Passion for the Occult in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries*, 1st American ed (New York: Knopf, 1983), 56.

⁴ Alex Owen, *The Darkened Room: Women, Power, and Spiritualism in Late Victorian England*, The New Cultural Studies Series (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1990), 69.

⁵ “To the Editor of ‘The Spiritualist’,” *The Spiritualist*, December 26, 1873, 11.

⁶ Owen, *The Darkened Room*, 69–70. See also Chapter 4, “The Ghost Grabbers” in Ruth Brandon’s *The Spiritualists*, 98–126.

elongation of the medium's body were reported."⁷ Home became acquainted with Elizabeth and Robert Browning, the latter holding no belief in Home's abilities and wrote a poem about him titled "Mr. Sludge." Home also gave séances for Napoleon III in Paris. Much has been published about the life and career of D.D. Home. However, mysteries and oddities remain, including the reason for his sudden departure from France in 1857, his "adoption" by a wealthy British woman, and rumours surrounding his sexuality.⁸

Accusations of fraud against mediums continued well into the twentieth century. This chapter examines a selection of the disagreements and libel cases for and against Barbanell that play out in the British courts and in the press. Maurice Barbanell's position on fraud within Spiritualism was clear. He wrote:

I have met fraud, both wilful and unconscious. I think I can say that I have exposed more charlatans in this field than any other person. My ability to unmask the trickster has been due to the fact that I have witnessed so many genuine phenomena that I was able to recognize the counterfeit. After all, the spurious is a copy of the real. Were there no genuine phenomena, there could be no simulations of them."⁹

Even knowing Barbanell's viewpoint on fraud within the movement, we must ask why he became so embroiled in so many libel cases and public disagreements. It is widely recognized that the popularity of the Spiritualist movement grew after the First World War. Geoffrey K. Nelson noted that at the end of the Great War, "Britain became a nation of bereaved" and that many of the population "who had lost relations and friends...were

⁷ Eric John Dingwall, *Some Human Oddities: Studies in the Queer, the Uncanny, and the Fanatical* (New York: New Hyde Park, University Books, 1962), 93.

⁸ Dingwall, 92, 95.

⁹ Maurice Barbanell, *This Is Spiritualism* (London: Spiritualist Press, 1959), 7.

attracted by the promise of a message from the departed.”¹⁰ However, according to Nelson, it was not only the churches that grew, but so did the number of fraudulent mediums who “set up business at home or in a hired hall in the back streets of the cities to cash in on the demand.”¹¹ The National Laboratory of Psychical Research, founded in 1925 to conduct scientific experiments on mediumship, published an essay, *Fraudulent Mediums*, that claimed “ninety per cent. of spiritualism is fraud and the rest has still to be explained.”¹²

While we saw a growth in Spiritualism in the 1920s, according to Nelson, the 1930s “Were the high water mark of the Spiritualist movement.” Quoting Maurice Barbanell, Nelson stated that in 1934, there were 100,000 home circles in the United Kingdom.¹³ Jenny Hazelgrove posited that the Spiritualist movement was popular during the interwar period as it “reflected the increasingly democratic values of the twentieth century.”¹⁴ The increase in scientific inquiry in the séance room is another essential factor that likely influenced Barbanell as, according to Beth Robertson, “psychical researchers shaped the practice of communing with the dead into an empirical exercise,” further noting that “in the process, investigators, psychics, and spirits became entangled in a gendered and sexual politics that dictated who was to have power over whom.”¹⁵

¹⁰ Geoffrey K. Nelson, *Spiritualism and Society* (New York: Schocken Books, 1969), 155.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Professor D.F. Fraser-Harris, MD, “Fraudulent Mediums. An Essay,” *Bulletin of the National Laboratory of Psychical Research* (January 1932), 3.

¹³ Nelson, *Spiritualism and Society*, 161, and Maurice Barbanell, “Another Silly ‘Challenge’ And Our Reply,” *Psychic News*, May 12, 1934, 7.

¹⁴ Jenny Hazelgrove, *Spiritualism and British Society between the Wars*, Studies in Popular Culture (Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 2000), 2.

¹⁵ Beth A. Robertson, *Science of the Séance: Transnational Networks and Gendered Bodies in the Study of Psychic Phenomena, 1918-40* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2016), 4.

It is highly probable, although unconfirmed, that Maurice Barbanell was spurred on by the libel case that Mrs. Meurig Morris brought against the *Daily Mail* in 1932. Morris, a trance medium, sued Associated Newspapers, Ltd., the publishers of the *Daily Mail*, over an article that stated, “her subconscious mind is crammed with spiritualistic jargon which she can trot out and hang on to any peg which may be given to her as a text or a subject for a sermon.”¹⁶ The article’s author also stated that he had attended four private séances with Morris, “and on all four occasions the young medium used the same phrases – many of which are almost meaningless – but strung them together in different contexts.”¹⁷ Morris lost the libel case and her subsequent appeal of the ruling. We saw in Chapter 1 that Maurice Barbanell published his first issue of *Psychic News* with a lead article written by Hannen Swaffer challenging the *Daily Mail* to expose several other mediums following their “exposure” of Meurig Morris. Writing about the Spiritualist press and Maurice Barbanell’s editorships of *Psychic News* and *Two Worlds*, Simeon Edmunds noted that “it would probably be more accurate to describe him [Barbanell] as the loudest voice in spiritualism and these two publications as his mouthpieces.”¹⁸ This sentence alone clearly indicates why Maurice Barbanell was vocal in his support and defence of Spiritualism: the newspapers gave him the platform to speak out, something others in the movement did not have.

¹⁶ Charles S. Sutton, “‘Powers’ Sermon-Jargon. One Talk for All Texts. Mrs. Morris Unconvincing. Is It Hypnotism?” *Daily Mail*, January 26, 1931, 9.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Simeon Edmunds, *Spiritualism: A Critical Survey; with a Foreword by Sir George Joy* (London, UK: Aquarian Press, 1966), 89.

Finally, Barbanell was motivated to support his fellow mediums owing to two laws in effect in the United Kingdom: “Every séance is automatically an illegal activity.”¹⁹ The *Witchcraft Act 1735* and the *Vagrancy Act* made it a criminal offence for a medium to perform any public display of mediumship, and every time they did so, they risked being arrested and prosecuted under the law, usually under the *Vagrancy Act*. Clairvoyants (mediums), fortune tellers, and palmists were known to be entrapped by *agents provocateurs*, police officers acting undercover, who would arrest the offender at their place of business.²⁰ Barbanell has “little sympathy with the many fortune-tellers who call themselves mediums,” but he said how the police treated them was “often scandalous.” He went on to call the use of an *agent provocateur* “disgusting.”²¹ Fortune tellers aside, Maurice Barbanell used his newspaper over the years to maintain his outrage that these two arcane laws existed. He also published a book, *Rogues and Vagabonds*, detailing the history of the *Vagrancy Act* and deputations made to the British government to have the laws repealed. His book's title comes from the Act's language: “An Act for the Punishment of idle and disorderly Persons, and Rogues and Vagabonds, in that Part of Great Britain called England.”²² Today, this Act is used to punish beggars and those who are homeless and sleep on the streets. The *Witchcraft Act* was repealed in 1951 and replaced with the Fraudulent Mediums Act, 1951.²³

¹⁹ Maurice Barbanell, *Rogues and Vagabonds* (London: Psychic Press, Ltd., 1944), 4.

²⁰ A rash of arrests were made in London during 1912, and the Criminal Investigation Department of New Scotland Yard kept detailed records of the arrests and statements made by the arresting officers as well as the defence provided by the arrestees. See also Fortune Telling and Palmistry: prosecutions under the Vagrancy Act, 1824, MEPO 2/1323, The National Archives, Kew – Metropolitan Police Office.

²¹ Maurice Barbanell, “The Law-Breaking Police!” April 29, 1933, *Psychic News*, 6.

²² Vagrancy Act, 1824, c. 83.

²³ Fraudulent Mediums Act, 1951 (repealed), c. 12 14.

A.W. Austen, *Psychic News*, and the Case of the Trumpet Fraud

In December 1932, just seven months after the launch of *Psychic News*, the paper published an article, written by A.W. Austen and titled “Fraudulent Medium Exposed: Trumpet Moved but Not By Spirits.” Austen pulled no punches with his opening sentence: “An amazing exhibit of séance fraud was given at a ‘circle’ which I attended Thursday.”²⁴ The reporter described in detail how the attendees paid five shillings to attend the séance led by the medium, Mrs. Barnett, who was accompanied by two other women, one young and one mysterious. A banjo and spirit trumpet, painted in places with paint that would glow in the darkened room, were placed in the centre of the room and, according to Austen, “the banjo was taken from the floor and moved around the room, being twanged all the while.”²⁵ The spirits were asked if “Annette” was playing the banjo, and the banjo responded with noises to which one of the medium’s women friends said meant the answer was “yes.” Billy Austen was not satisfied that the banjo was being manipulated by discarnate entities, stating, “If the banjo was being twanged by spirit hands, there would be no reason why several times during the ‘selections’ my view of the trumpet should be impeded.” This left Austen to believe that there was a human involved in what was happening in the séance room, especially as the third woman was silent during the performance when Mrs. Barnett and the other woman were singing and talking throughout. Austen said that this silence “could be explained by the fact the centre chair was empty. At the beginning of the ‘séance’ it was

²⁴ A.W. Austen, “Fraudulent Medium Exposed: Trumpet Moved but Not by Spirits,” *Psychic News*, December 24, 1932, 11.

²⁵ Austen, “Fraudulent Medium Exposed.”

occupied by the mysterious woman whom no one seemed to know, and who, I am positive, was the agency behind the movements of the trumpet and the banjo.” Furthermore, the messages from spirit delivered to the circle members by the medium were said to be vague and incoherent at the best of times, with Austen labelling the attempts as “putrid” and “nonsense.”²⁶ “It was a disgraceful exhibition of fraud, and I am surprised that the other sitters, except for Mr. Bedbrook, believed the piffle they were told and the childish things they saw.”²⁷ It is unknown if Austen and Barbanell expected this short article to evolve into the following drama.

In the following issue of *Psychic News*, Maurice Barbanell, in his weekly “All Worlds are One” section, reported that he had been threatened by Mr. Barnett, the husband of the medium from Austen’s séance, “he was very angry. ‘You have got to apologize,’ he said, ‘or....’” Barbanell replied that Spiritualists do not apologize to fraudulent mediums. Mr. Barnett later contacted Barbanell, claiming that his wife was not the medium that evening; that role was held by the mysterious third woman present, whose name he did not know.²⁸ Then, Austen was challenged by the famous violinist turned psychic, Florizel von Reuter, in the January 7, 1933, letters to the editor section of *Psychic News*. von Reuter claimed that there was no exposure of fraud at the séance because the medium was not “caught *in flagrantis*, that is to say, red handed, in the act of cheating through being seized and held, or

²⁶ Austen, “Fraudulent Medium Exposed.”

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Maurice Barbanell, “Threatened Again,” *Psychic News*, December 31, 1932, 6.

having a light thrown suddenly on the proceedings.”²⁹ Billy Austen was “quite unrepentant,” that the phenomena he witnessed were fraudulent in his response in the same section of the newspaper: “I not only suspected that the whole thing was fraudulent but saw the tricks being performed, so clearly that I am very surprised the majority of the other sitters appeared not to notice them...I had no torch with me and was several yards from the light switch. To have made a blind grab in the dark would only have created an unnecessary scene.”³⁰ *Psychic News* published a third letter proclaiming that “the time has arrived for a crusade to be started by all sincere Spiritualists to rid themselves of the pests who, by their abominable habits, cast a stigma on our cause.”³¹ This letter was a call that a reform league be created to protect genuine mediums and “expose the sharks who profess to be mediums but are nothing more than rogues with a glib tongue.” A reform league was not created, and this enraged correspondent was reminded that the Spiritualists’ National Union provided certification of mediums. This, however, was not the end of the affair.

Mrs. Emily Ellen Gosden, Mrs. Barnett’s legal name, filed writs (a formal written judicial order) against The Psychic Press, Ltd. (publishers of *Psychic News*), Maurice Barbanell (editor of *Psychic News*), A.W. Austen (reporter at *Psychic News*), as well as Thomas de la Rue & Co., Ltd. (printers of *Psychic News*), to seek damages for libel printed in the newspaper in articles and letters already mentioned. The International Psychic Gazette

²⁹ Florizel von Reuter, “Was it an exposure?” *Psychic News*, January 7, 1933, 14.

³⁰ A.W. Austen, “Quite Unrepentant,” *Psychic News*, January 7, 1933, 14.

³¹ John. W.V. Heaton, “Start a Crusade!” *Psychic News*, January 7, 1933, 14-15.

supported Gosden.³² In an article titled “The Defence of Mediums” published in April 1933 who wrote that the legal case was “the first step in an effort, strongly urged from the Other Side, to repel the continued virulent attacks upon honest and innocent mediums by misguided persons, within and without the Spiritualist Movement.” The journal also reported that it had set up a “Fighting Fund.” It solicited financial donations to “be used to defend any mediums who are unjustly attacked and to bring their assailants to a proper sense of responsibility towards the gifted sensitives who are devoting their lives to link up this world and the next.” Barbanell and his fellow defendants, clearly perturbed by this article, alleged contempt against the *Gazette* and this was further compounded by the fact that in the February 1933 issue of *The International Psychic Gazette*, Barbanell was called “a champion medium-wrecker!” for his work alleging certain mediums were acting fraudulently.³³ In sum, the defendants believed that the case against them was prejudiced.

The Law Report dated April 28, 1933, published in *The Times* the following day, detailed the sometimes-humorous exchanges between the legal counsel for the plaintiffs, the defendants, and the Lord Chief Justice.³⁴ In any event, the Lord Chief Justice ruled: “In my opinion there is nothing here which is really calculated to prejudice the fair trial of the action.

³² The *International Psychic Gazette* billed itself as “The Independent Monthly Organ of Spiritualism and Psychical Research”; it ran from 1913-1935 under the editorship of John Lewis. See <http://iapsop.com/> for further details and issues of this journal.

³³ “Mr. Barbanell ‘Exposes’ The Wrong Medium! Truculent Refusal of An Apology! The Medium’s Story of her Complete Innocence,” *The International Psychic Gazette*, February 1933, 69-70. Mrs. Barnett was given the opportunity to provide an account of her version of events including how none of the sitters expressed any dissatisfaction of the evening’s performance. Barnett also revealed the name of the “mysterious woman” whom A.W. Austen wrote about: “Mrs. Nina Bradley...is a gentle, frank little lady with a pleasant smile, and not the kind of person to be mixed up with anything fraudulent.”

³⁴ When talking about spirits, Mr. Justice Avory asked “Oh, do they take part in litigation? They cannot be made liable to pay the costs, can they? (laughter)”

The rule is discharged without costs, but I desire to say that the newspaper [*International Psychic Gazette*] ought not to continue the publication of these articles.” This was effectively the end of the case. For reasons unknown, Emily Ellen Gosden/Mrs. Barnett did not bring her libel case to court, and one year later, on February 17, 1934, *Psychic News* published an article, “Fake Medium Runs Away,” where the newspaper stated that they “instructed our solicitors to mail application to have the case dismissed. This application was not opposed. So, the case is ended.” However, this was not the end of Maurice Barbanell’s adventures with libel actions; it was merely the beginning.

Why did Barbanell become heavily involved in libel cases in the 1930s? The 1936 *Sim v Stretch* libel case possibly paved the way for Barbanell and others to seek damages for libel. The case centered on the language used in a telegram whereby a housemaid re-entered the defendant's service, and the telegram asked for “the money you borrowed” to be returned. The case was a test for defamatory meaning, with legal counsel asking, “whether the words in their ordinary signification are capable of being defamatory ... Judges and text book writers alike have found difficulty in defining with precision the word ‘defamatory’. The conventional phrase exposing the plaintiff to hatred, ridicule, or contempt is probably too narrow. The question is complicated by considering the person or class of persons whose reaction to the publication is the test of the wrongful character of the words used.”³⁵

³⁵ *All England Law Reports Annotated*, August 1, 1936.

Nandor Fodor, an Infra-Red Ray Tool, and Sex in Mediumship

On January 31, 1938, The International Institute for Psychical Research Ltd. (IIPR) sent a postcard to its members announcing the resignation of its chairman and member of the Council, Mr. J. Arthur Findlay. Findlay had given his resignation at the January 26 Council Meeting for the “reason that as the Research Officer proposed to commence an action for libel against the *Psychic News*, he felt it impossible, as the principal proprietor of that newspaper, to retain his position as Chairman of the Institute or as a Member of the Council.”³⁶ Five days later, *Psychic News* published on its front page that they were expecting a writ for libel to be issued against them by Dr. Nandor Fodor, the Research Office of the IIPR, and that Fodor’s solicitor had sent the newspaper a letter “asking us to print an apology to Fodor and to give an undertaking ‘not to repeat or publish in future any libels.’” *Psychic News* stated that they were “unaware of any libels on Fodor published by us, and we are not prepared to print any apologies.”³⁷ Nandor Fodor was born in Hungary and received his PhD in law before emigrating to the United States of America in the 1920s. He worked as a law assistant in Hungary before changing his profession to journalism when he arrived in the United States. He soon became interested in psychical research, and it can be said that he enjoyed a good relationship with the Spiritualist press. Fodor wrote for *Psychic News*, including his account of his first sitting in a séance with the American medium, William

³⁶ Concerning the International Institute for Psychical Research Ltd. Harry Price Archive. Special Collections & Archives, Senate House Library, University of London. HPC/7/19. 1938.

³⁷ “Fodor Consults His Lawyers,” *Psychic News*, February 5, 1938, 1.

Cartheuser, where the spirit of Fodor's deceased father was channelled, with Cartheuser speaking in Hungarian, a language he did not know.³⁸

What transpired was that Dr. Nandor Fodor had brought a claim for "damages for alleged libel from the defendants ... in respect of articles appearing in *Psychic News*."³⁹ The hearing began on March 1, 1939. It was heard before Mr. Justice Singleton, and a Special Jury in the High Court of Justice, King's Bench Division: Fodor alleged that the articles "suggested that he [Fodor] was not a person fit to carry out psychical investigation."⁴⁰ The case, which was reported in newspapers across the United Kingdom, with headlines such as "Séances Tested by New Device-Red Ray Challenge to Medium,"⁴¹ "Unique Action for Alleged Libel,"⁴² and "Ectoplasm Explained to the Judge,"⁴³ was centered on Fodor's claim that the words used in articles published in *Psychic News* meant that he:

³⁸ Nandor Fodor, "Dead Father Converses in His Native Tongue. A Spirit Talks to His Son in Hungarian At A Voice Séance," *Psychic News*, November 7, 1936. William Cartheuser was brought to Canada in 1930 to be the medium at The Church of Divine Revelation, a Spiritualist church founded by Jenny O'Hara Pincock and Minnie and Fred Maines, in St. Catherines, Ontario. The Church closed in 1935 after Cartheuser was reported to be acting fraudulently. While there is no doubt that Cartheuser did have some genuine mediumistic abilities, he eventually appears to have succumbed to dishonest practices to obtain money from people. See Henry Clay McComas, *Ghosts I Have Talked With* (Baltimore: The Williams & Wilkins Company, 1935), Chapter 3, and Jenny O'Hara Pincock to Henry Remmers, April 5, 1944, Maines Pincock family fonds, Special Collections & Archives, University of Waterloo Library, GA64-1-17.

³⁹ "Law Report, Mar. 1," *The Times*, March 2, 1939, 4. The defendants in this case were listed as: "Psychic Press, Limited, of High Holborn, W.C., the proprietors of the *Psychic News*; Mr. Maurice Barbanell, the editor of that newspaper; Mr. Paul Miller, in the employment of the first defendants; Peverlys, Limited, the printers of the *Psychic News*; and Horace Marshall and Son, Limited, the distributors of it."

⁴⁰ "Psychic Investigator Denies That He Persecuted Mediums," *Manchester Evening News*, March 2, 1939, 7.

⁴¹ "Séances Tested by New Device: Red Ray Challenge to Medium," *Manchester Evening News*, March 1, 1939, 1.

⁴² "'Unique' Action for Alleged Libel," *The Star*, March 1, 1939, 8.

⁴³ "Ectoplasm Explained to the Judge," *Daily News (London)*, March 2, 1939, 11. Ectoplasm, or teleplasm, is a shapeless substance that leaves the orifices of a medium and is what causes spirit forms to materialise and take a form. Sometimes faces are reported to have appeared in ectoplasm, and this subject has often been the cause of much controversy and is widely discussed in Spiritualist literature. See Hamilton, T.G., *Intention and Survival*, Toronto: The Macmillan Company of Canada, 1942. The Hamilton Family fonds held at Special Collections &

Was not a fit and proper person to conduct psychic research; that he was unfit to be employed as research officer by the International Institute for Psychical Research; that he was biased against and hostile to all mediums and applied to them unfair and useless tests; that he made offers to mediums which were not genuine and which he was not authorized to make; and that he was inexperienced and ignorant of all that a person in his position ought to know about psychic phenomena.⁴⁴

Fodor made multiple libel claims, with the principal issue arising from his insistence that he had invented a tool using infrared rays that would enable him to photograph materialization mediums as they worked in the darkened séance room. Materialization as a form of mediumship started to develop during the second wave of Spiritualism that began in the 1870s and involved “the production of a fully formed materialized spirit who made an appearance at séances and walked about the room in full view of those present.”⁴⁵ *Psychic News* reported that Fodor had written in an American publication (later revealed to be *Prediction*): “You may hear of materialisation mediums producing full form phantoms and doing a thriving business. But you will not hear of them in connection with infra-red cinema experiments...At present in England, there is no contemporary scientific evidence for the reality of materialisation.” Of course, *Psychic News* did not agree with Fodor and responded to him in print stating that he “does not know what he is talking about.”⁴⁶ The newspaper continued that it did not believe that scientific gadgets were necessary to prove that the

Archives at the University of Manitoba contains many photographic examples of ectoplasmic phenomena and many can be viewed online:

https://digitalcollections.lib.umanitoba.ca/islandora/object/uofm%3Ahamilton_family/

⁴⁴ “Law Report, Mar. 1,” *The Times*, March 2, 1939, 4.

⁴⁵ Owen, *The Darkened Room*, 42.

⁴⁶ “Researcher Still Attacks Mediums: Nandor Fodor Admits Failure with Schneider, Sneer at England’s Materialisation Evidence,” *Psychic News*, September 4, 1937, 7.

human spirit survived physical death and that there were “Spiritualists in London who have witnessed phenomena that would make the mouths of psychic researchers water.”

Another of Dr. Fodor’s claims for libel came from the article in *Psychic News* on December 18, 1937, that ran with the title: “Fodor Finds Sex in Mediumship! He considers it the ‘most important angle.’” Paul Miller, the author of the article, reviewed an essay written by Fodor that had been published in a book, *Consciousness Creative*⁴⁷, stating that the essay was an “insult to the great spirit guides, who for years train their mediums for the task of giving evidence of Survival,” and that Fodor “confessed his amazing ignorance of the nature of psychic phenomena.”⁴⁸ During the hearing, Mr. Justice Singleton, after asking and being told who the great spirit guides were, asked, “are they capable of being insulted?” bringing laughter to the court room. The case lasted for three days, and witnesses, including Maurice Barbanell, Paul Miller, and J. Arthur Findlay, all gave evidence before the court. Estelle Roberts testified that mediumship had nothing to do with sex, and the author Shaw Desmond spoke in favour of Fodor, stating that he believed the psychic researcher to be nothing but scrupulous in his treatment of mediums. At the end of the hearing, after a deliberation of only fifty minutes, the jury found for Fodor on two of the four articles he had alleged contained libel against him.

⁴⁷ Francis J. Mott, *Consciousness Creative: An Outline of the Science, Religion, and Philosophy of Universal Integration* (Boston: A.A. Beauchamp, 1937).

⁴⁸ In the article Miller wrote that “although it is repugnant I must deal with some of the disgusting things written by Fodor in this book. He has the audacity to offend all decent people by daring to suggest that mediumship increases menstruation and that in one case psychic phenomena caused ‘a state of voluptuous-erotic ecstasy which was followed by true orgasm.’”

The Zomahs

In the fall of 1937, the Welsh-born, American medium John Kelly, well known for “blindfold ballot reading,” held a public demonstration in London. Barbanell met Kelly at Lily Dale, likely during the summer of 1937 when he [Barbanell] was an invited speaker at the well-known Spiritualist town in New York State.⁴⁹ This style of mediumship involved the attendees’ bringing questions in sealed envelopes about loved ones who had passed over. The medium was blindfolded so as not to be able to see the envelopes. They would answer the questions aided by the spirit for whom the question was intended.

Using a blindfold was intended to remove any doubt that the medium was cheating and could read the contents of the envelopes as they gave the messages from the spirit world.⁵⁰ *Psychic News* had invited conjurers from the Magicians’ Club and the Institute of Magicians to this demonstration, including the presidents of these groups, Will Goldston and A. Zomah. The event turned sour for Barbanell and Kelly when the conjurers “foolishly shouted, ‘Humbug, Fraud and Trickery,’” at the platform.⁵¹ One of the conjurers, according to the article, also requested that a blindfold (in addition to the four being tied around the eyes) be tied around the medium’s nose: “I will not have the medium tied in such a way that it is not possible for him to speak or to breathe,” was Barbanell’s response. John Kelly’s reaction

⁴⁹ See Maurice Barbanell, *Power of the Spirit* (London: Psychic Book Club, 1949), 165-172.

⁵⁰ Ballot reading, also known as billet reading, became a scandal in the 1970s. Lamar Keene published a book that detailed his time at Camp Chesterfield (a Spiritualist centre in Indiana) where he worked, with others, as a medium who faked their abilities. One way to defraud people seeking messages from their loved ones on the other side was to use billet reading. It was one of the easiest ways to cheat. See Keene, M. Lamar, and Allen Spraggett, *The Psychic Mafia* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1976; New York: Prometheus Books, 1997).

⁵¹ “Dead Woman Speaks in Front of 1,000 People: Blindfold Medium Amazes London Crowd,” *Psychic News*, October 9, 1937, 1-2.

to this episode was summed up in an interview with the *London Evening Standard*: “If the conjurors think I am a conjuror like them they can prove their point quite easily. Let them do as much as I did. Conjurors are always saying that everything a medium does can be done by conjuring-but they never do it. The truth is they can’t. Houdini himself once admitted as much to me.”⁵²

What happened next was that Maurice Barbanell, as editor of *Psychic News*, issued a challenge to A. Zomah, the president of the Institute of Magicians, that included the following: “I challenge any member of your organisation to give a similar public demonstration. Not only will he have to demonstrate his ability to read while blindfolded to the extent that Kelly was, the contents of envelopes, but also to give answers which will be as correct in their detail as his were. Further, he must give accurate information about deceased relatives, in some cases their full names.”⁵³ After some further harsh words printed in the newspaper, the Institute of Magicians eventually chose Madam Zomah, the wife of the organization’s president, to respond to Barbanell’s challenge. The demonstration was set for January 26, 1938, at the Conway Hall in London.

⁵² Special Correspondent, “‘I Can See Spirits All Round Me Now - Some Eating’,” *Evening Standard*, October 2, 1937, 12. Harry Houdini, born Erich Weiss, spent years trying to debunk mediums by showing how they were performing feats of magic and that they were not communicating with spirits as they claimed. One of the most famous cases that Houdini was involved with was the Mina “Margery” Crandon case in Boston, USA. Crandon channelled the spirit of her deceased brother Walter, submitted herself to rigorous testing (to win money), and was claimed to be fraudulent. See David Jaher, *The Witch of Lime Street* (New York: Broadway Books, 2015). Maurice Barbanell was friends with Crandon and her husband and visited them in Boston, along with his wife Sylvia. A report of that trip is found in Chapter 9 of his book, *Power of the Spirit* (London: Psychic Book Club, 1949), 130-136, as well as in the pages of *Psychic News*.

⁵³ “We Challenge the Institute of Magicians,” *Psychic News*, October 16, 1937, 1.

“Conjurors’ farcical attempt to emulate Kelly: Audience Laugh at Clumsy Psychic Demonstration” ran the headline on the front page of the February 5, 1938, edition of *Psychic News*.⁵⁴ The article, written by Maurice Barbanell, covered three pages and was a scathing attack on the Zomahs, stating that “the performance...was a fiasco...was childish and amateurish and would have been interesting possibly to a kindergarten.” It was reported that Spiritualists in the audience shouted protests at Madam Zomah’s poor performance, in only attempting to give messages from eight of the envelopes received before needing to rest from the exhaustion of the demonstration. Further, the article claimed that Madam Zomah’s blindfold, which no one present was allowed to inspect, was thin enough that she could see through it, allowing her to read the body language of those assisting her in the test, thus trying to supply her with the answers to make it look like she was working as well as John Kelly did a few months before. Before printing letters from attendees that aligned with the views of *Psychic Press*, the article concluded with the advice, “The Institute of Magicians would be well advised, if it is at all jealous of its reputation, to improve its public conjuring displays – and to forget about Spiritualism.”

The Zomahs, real names Alfred James Giddings and Adelaide Ellen Giddens, were not happy, and they took Maurice Barbanell, Psychic Press, Limited, as well as the printers and distributors of *Psychic News* to court, claiming damages for alleged libel in the article discussed above, as well as in the poster advertising the newspaper.⁵⁵ The hearing, like Dr.

⁵⁴ This was the same issue of *Psychic News* in which it was reported that Dr. Nandor Fodor was issuing a writ for libel against them.

⁵⁵ This was not the first time that Mr. and Mrs. Giddings, known professionally as The Zomahs, had been in court. In 1935, the married couple were awarded £900.00 in damages following a case for libel and defamation

Nandor Fodor's libel case earlier that month, occurred in the High Court of Justice King's Bench Division before Mr. Justice Singleton and a Special Jury and lasted for four days, from March 20 to March 23, 1939.⁵⁶ The trial opened with an explanation of the act that the Zomahs had performed for over thirty years, known as "The Unsolved Mystery," and was an act based on thought transference. Counsel for the plaintiffs claimed that no codes were used during the performance as Mr. Zomah would move around the audience without speaking and that no one had been able to uncover how Madam Zomah was able to describe the items taken from the audience members and that was placed before her, as she was blindfolded. Further, during the opening day of the trial, the Zomahs claimed that they knew about ballot reading, yet they had never performed this before they took to the platform in response to the challenge set by *Psychic News*. Mrs. Giddings, under cross-examination, claimed "that there were no howls of laughter the whole evening" and that "she was not interrupted and criticized by the audience all through her performance."⁵⁷ Further, some witnesses claimed no interruptions during the trial, while others insisted there were.

When it came time for Maurice Barbanell to take the stand, he confirmed that he had written the article and that calling the evening a "fiasco" was "a fair description of what occurred that night." Barbanell informed the court that he had previously seen The

that they mounted against Amalgamated Press, Limited, and Mr. J.C. Cannel for an article that claimed the Zomahs had "improperly disclosed the secrets of the method by which they performed their illusion 'act'." See *The Times Law Reports* for February 22-28, 1935. See also David Britland's website, Cardopolis, for an article titled *Zomah – The Unsolved Mystery* for further details about the Zomahs' act, <http://cardopolis.blogspot.com/2016/03/zomah-unsolved-mystery.html>, accessed March 22, 2023.

⁵⁶ This case received national attention in the United Kingdom: reports were printed in newspapers including the *Manchester Evening News*, *Nottingham Evening Post*, *Leeds Mercury*, *Bristol Evening Post*, and *The Scotsman*, to name but a few.

⁵⁷ "Law Report, Mar. 20," *The Times*, March 21, 1939, 5.

Unresolved Mystery Act performed by The Zomahs but had been unable to ascertain how they achieved the results they did. He went on to state that while he could not provide the exact code used by Madam Zomah to read the ballots, he and others could confirm the “manner of code.” His wife, Sylvia, confirmed this when she was called to the stand. Maurice Barbanell went on to claim that he thought there were confederates, or people helping Madam Zomah to cheat, in the audience as the conjuring couple had failed to sign an affidavit swearing that they would not use confederates. In summing up, Mr. Justice Singleton informed the jury that the “case of the three Defendants, Psychic Press Limited, Maurice Barbanell, the Editor, and Peverlys Limited, the printers, is really the same. If you have come to the conclusion that the article is defamatory of the Plaintiffs, then these Defendants say that it is fair comment on a matter of public interest, and if you find that they are entitled to a verdict in their favour. If you think at the conclusion of the whole case that this was fair comment, then you will find a verdict for the Defendants throughout.”⁵⁸ After deliberation, “the jury returned a verdict for the plaintiffs in respect of the article but not of the poster,” and Mr. and Mrs. Giddings were awarded £100.00 each.⁵⁹ Of course, *Psychic News* reported the outcome of the case: “We have fought for Spiritualism, and we have lost. Twelve ‘good men and true’-in this jury it included two women-decided against us.” The newspaper commented that the trial had cost them more than the money awarded to the Zomahs: *Psychic News* had to pay all costs, including those of the company responsible for

⁵⁸ Giddings & Another v. Psychic Press Limited & Others, High Court of Justice. King’s Bench Division, March 23, 1939.

⁵⁹ “Law Report, Mar. 23,” *The Times*, March 24, 1939, 4.

printing the newspaper. Having incurred costs of no less than £1,000.00, the newspaper printed that “we have been approached by many readers, asking whether a fund will be opened and, because of that, we are now giving all Spiritualists an opportunity to contribute. All donations will be acknowledged in ‘Psychic News.’”⁶⁰ The Fodor libel case was also mentioned to support the newspaper's request for financial support from readers.

The Physical Debunker Against the Propagandist: Harry Price vs. Maurice Barbanell and *Psychic News*

Harry Price called himself a “psychist,” though the record of his long career suggests that he was rather a debunker of spiritualistic phenomena. He was probably one of the greatest antagonists of mediums, especially physical mediums, and of Spiritualism in general. Price was interested in the subject from about the year 1896 when he attended spiritualist meetings and séances and was “reading – and buying – every book on spiritualism, conjuring, and psychical research” not because he thought he was a medium himself, but this was clearly an interest in the performative aspects of the ‘vaudeville mediums’ of the day.⁶¹ He did not, however, professionally turn his attention to psychical research until around the age of forty, which coincided roughly with when Maurice Barbanell found Spiritualism in 1920. Price founded the National Laboratory of Psychical Research, of which he was “honorary director,” to create enough interest in academia that universities would establish departments dedicated to psychical research. Except for a handful of mediums whose work

⁶⁰ “And This Is What It Costs,” *Psychic News*, April 1, 1939, 2.

⁶¹ Harry Price, *Search for the Truth: My Life for Psychical Research* (London: Collins, 1942), 36, 57.

he respected, Price was an unwavering skeptic, writing that his “sustained interest in psychical research must be based on a very solid foundation of supranormal *facts*. No one outside of a lunatic asylum would devote his life, his money, and most of his waking hours—as I have done—to a subject that consisted entirely of fraud and charlatanism.”⁶² Maurice Barbanell and Harry Price knew each other, but their relationship eventually became adversarial.

The day before the launch of *Psychic News*, Maurice Barbanell wrote to Harry Price, sending him a copy of the first edition of the newspaper and asking Price the question, “Whether you would care to write one of the weekly debates, giving your point of view why Spiritualism is not a religion, but something that requires enquiry by psychic research.”⁶³ Barbanell sent a second letter on May 28, 1932, asking Price to send “three to four hundred words describing the work of your laboratory, making it as newsy as possible.”⁶⁴ Price sent a cordial response stating, “allow me to compliment you on the general get-up, format, and news content of the paper. I think it is really excellent and should have a large sale if you can only find the right channel through which to circulate it.” Price agreed to contribute to the newspaper’s weekly debate section; however, as he was “overwhelmed with work,” it would not be until after he returned from Germany and his Brocken experiment that he would have the time to write the debate.⁶⁵

⁶² Price, 138.

⁶³ Maurice Barbanell to Harry Price, May 27, 1932, Harry Price archive, Special Collections & Archives, Senate House Library, University of London, HPC/4B/283.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Harry Price to Maurice Barbanell, May 30, 1932, Harry Price archive, Special Collections & Archives, Senate House Library, University of London, HPC/4A/2.

Harry Price sent Barbanell the “newsy” piece on the National Laboratory on June 6, 1932. However, it does not appear to have been published in *Psychic News*. It likely did not make the press as Price’s Brocken experiment became headline news, for all the wrong reasons, shortly after that. This situation came about when Price, Dr. Cyril Joad, a noted philosopher from the University of London, and others travelled to Brocken in the Harz Mountains of Germany to conduct an “experiment in Black Magic...on the mountain known in Germany as the ‘Witches Trysting Place’ where mysterious and often sinister rites are believed by the superstitious to have been performed in the past.” The experiment’s aim was “to demonstrate that the days of sorcery are over” and involved a virgin, a group of magicians, and a white male goat whose mouth was “to be smeared with blood, honey and the metal scraped from church bells” and “covered with a pure white cloth.” After a series of incantations around a fire, the goat was supposed to be transformed into “a youth of surpassing beauty.”⁶⁶ When the experiment took place at midnight on June 18, 1932, “the goat refused to do his share and be turned into a young man, and the result of the experiment was hailed with derision by the crowd.”⁶⁷

Not surprisingly, the experiment’s results, or lack thereof, received attention in the press with headlines such as “Black Magic Fadeout, Hey, Presto! But Oh, It Was No Go, How They Played The Goat On The Brocken,” and “Same Old Goat: Black Magic Could Not

⁶⁶ “Virgin in White to Aid Scientists; Black Magic Rites: Weird Midnight Sorcery Tests,” *The People*, June 12, 1932, 15.

⁶⁷ “Test of ‘Black Magic’ Beast That Would Not Be Made Beautiful,” *The Guardian*, June 18, 1932, 18.

Change Him, Police Called To Keep Order at Mystic Circle.”⁶⁸ *Psychic News* was no exception. In Maurice Barbanell’s “All Worlds Are One” section, the headline ran, “Playing The Goat.” Barbanell displayed his derision of the event that transpired, stating that “we seldom agree with humorous articles on psychic matters, but we do applaud the ridicule poured upon the Harz Mountains ‘experiment,’” going on to write that Price and Joad were “wasting their time standing on a mountain top at midnight...to test whether there are witches. The only witches are the ones that made James I seasick before he passed the Witchcraft Act, under which Spiritualists still suffer. You cannot take the National Laboratory of Psychic Research seriously if it goes in for this sort of thing.”⁶⁹

Harry Price was not amused. In a letter to “The Editor” of *Psychic News*, Price wrote that “the remarks in the current issue of Psychic News concerning our Brocken experiment convey an entirely false idea as to why we carried out the test...The statement that we went ‘in order to test whether there are witches’ is utterly untrue. The experiment has nothing to do with witches.” Price explained that he and Joad were present because local authorities had organized a “Goethe night” and their participation in the event “would be undertaken ‘to emphasize the absolute futility of Black Magic ritual and this shame its remaining devotees.’”⁷⁰

⁶⁸ “Black Magic Fadeout, Hey, Presto! But Oh, It Was No Go, How They Played the Goat on the Brocken,” *The People*, June 19, 1932, 11, and “Same Old Goat: Black Magic Could Not Change Him, Police Called to Keep Order at Mystic Circle,” *Sunday Dispatch*, June 19, 1932, 13.

⁶⁹ Maurice Barbanell, “Playing the Goat,” *Psychic News*, June 25, 1932, 6. James I had a keen interest in demonology and during a stormy sailing trip to Europe he blamed the weather on witchcraft which resulted in the *Witchcraft Act* being restored.

⁷⁰ Harry Price to Maurice Barbanell, June 24, 1932. Harry Price archive, Special Collections & Archives, Senate House Library, University of London, HPC/4A/2.

Maurice Barbanell did not publish Harry Price's letter. Instead, he published other comments about the Brocken experiment in his "All Worlds Are One" section. Writing about the "goat-show" Barbanell recounted a conversation he had with J.C. Cannel, a journalist from the *Daily Sketch*, who was present at the experiment and was asked by a German reporter, "why have journalists come all the way from London for this?" Cannel responded, "What are you doing here?," a response that, according to Barbanell, "shut up the questioner."⁷¹ Upset that Barbanell did not publish his letter and continued to deride him, Harry Price wrote to the editor asking, "Are you afraid to publish the truth in your paper?" The psychical researcher had no qualms about being attacked by Barbanell, telling him, "I do object to your publishing false statements about me when they have been proved untrue. Also, I object to your posing as a friend in your private correspondence with me and then attacking me in print." In fact, these words printed by Maurice Barbanell left Harry Price not wanting anything more to do with him, closing his letter asking "please do not come to me in future for assistance. If this is the way you are going to behave towards your 'friends,' how long do you think you are going to keep them, or your paper?"⁷² Barbanell replied to Price one week later, informing him that he "cannot see where we have published any untrue statements in the 'Psychic News.' We are not attacking you; we are merely attacking the goat incident."⁷³

⁷¹ Maurice Barbanell, "Getting Price's Goat," *Psychic News*, July 9, 1932, 6.

⁷² Harry Price to Maurice Barbanell, July 8, 1932. Harry Price archive, Special Collections & Archives, Senate House Library, University of London, HPC/4A/2.

⁷³ Maurice Barbanell to Harry Price, July 14, 1932. Harry Price archives, Special Collections & Archives, Senate House Library, University of London, HPC/4B/283.

Whatever friendship Barbanell and Price enjoyed was over, and the editor had no intention of forgetting the Brocken experiment. In September 1932, Barbanell issued a challenge, as he was wont to do, to Harry Price over Price's claim that the materialization medium, Helen Duncan, did not genuinely materialize spirit forms but instead regurgitated cheesecloth that her supporters, Barbanell included, said was ectoplasm. The challenge was for Price to admit to cutting a piece of ectoplasm from Duncan and taking it to Hannen Swaffer. Not missing an opportunity to belittle Price, the *Psychic News* article informed its readers that "all that Harry Price has seen, or so he says, is cheesecloth. No, not goat's cheese, just ordinary cheese."⁷⁴ Price did not respond to the challenge, which only provoked Barbanell to publish another swipe at Price, asking, "Why does Harry Price not answer? Has he lost the ectoplasm? Perhaps the goat ate it."⁷⁵

What was left of the relationship between Harry Price and Maurice Barbanell reached what could be considered its lowest point in 1938. While Price does not appear to have made any negative comments in public about Barbanell, his dislike of the Spiritualist press was evident: "Spiritualism all over the world suffers from its Press. With some exceptions, the spiritualist journals are often badly written and edited, and a few are sensational to a degree. Sometimes their pages are devoted to private quarrels, personalities, abuse of the scientific

⁷⁴ "A Challenge to Harry Price. Will He Tell About January 23, 1931?" *Psychic News*, September 17, 1932, 5.

⁷⁵ "A Challenge Repeated," *Psychic News*, October 1, 1932, 6. Harry Price was not without a sense of humour when thinking about Maurice Barbanell. In a letter written in 1933 to Ernest Oaten, the editor of *Two Worlds*, Price was considering starting his own journal "dealing with psychic subjects." He ended the letter, "Have you heard the latest psychic joke? Barbanell, in the course of time, 'passed on'. He arrived at the Golden Gates and Peter said, 'Who are you?' Barbanell said, 'I am a psychic editor with the largest circulation.' 'Oh, come this way Mr. Oaten.'" Harry Price to Ernest W. Oaten, March 28, 1933. Harry Price archive. Special Collections & Archives, Senate House Library, University of London, HPC/4A/85.

researcher, gibes at the Church and mud-slinging at rival editors.”⁷⁶ This comment, published in his book, also appeared in Price's article published in the *Sheffield Telegraph* with the attention-grabbing headline: “Something Wrong With Spiritualists. Fake ‘Mediums’ Screened.”⁷⁷ Price began his article with a strong statement: “Spiritualists, I am going to talk to you seriously. Many of you are my friends and, as a friend, I am now addressing you. The fact is, there is something radically wrong with you and it is time to put your house in order.” Price had three issues with Spiritualists and mediums: 1) Two British people, who called themselves photographic mediums, were tried and convicted of producing fake spirit photographs in South Africa before returning to continue working in England; 2) A materialization medium who “produced” ectoplasm that was cheesecloth, was tried and convicted, yet continued to give séances and mediumistic sittings; and, 3) another medium was tried and convicted for fraudulent séances, yet “a certain section of the psychic Press began screaming about a ‘miscarriage of justice’ and the ‘martyred medium.’ Ultimately, they [the psychic Press] raised £100 for him!” Price did not name the people accused and convicted of acting fraudulently in their mediumship, nor the psychic newspaper who supported them. However, it would not have been difficult for readers of Price’s article to determine to whom he was referring, as the cases mentioned had been widely reported in the British press, both spiritualist and mainstream: 1) Craig and George Falconer, 2) Helen Duncan, and 3) Clive Holmes. Holmes was tried, convicted, and sentenced to four months in

⁷⁶ Harry Price, *Fifty Years of Psychical Research: A Critical Survey* (London, New York: Longmans, Green., 1939; New York: Arno Press, 1975), 2. Citation refers to the Arno Press edition.

⁷⁷ Price, “Something Wrong with Spiritualists.”

prison for fraud after holding a séance in his London home and was said to have struck a woman who was present. The case was well-reported across the United Kingdom.⁷⁸

Price did not stop there. He continued to attack the Spiritualist press with comments including, “These psychic and occult sheets are the happy hunting ground of the large army of charlatans and spellbinders who prey on credulity and make a fat living out of the bereaved, the diseased, the ignorant, and the morbidly curious.” While admitting that some of the psychic press was decent, Price ended his article reinforcing his view that “the typical spiritualist sheet is filled with untrue and sensational accounts of alleged miracles... These lurid stories are sheer propaganda and are printed in order to see the papers.” In fact, we know that, according to the *Sheffield Telegraph*’s Chief Reporter, the objective of Harry Price’s article, as well as others written by Sheffield area Spiritualists, was “to start discussions on this subject,” and cause, “some provocation for correspondence.”⁷⁹

The article certainly provoked a reaction. Henderson & Simmons, solicitors for Maurice Barbanell and *Psychic News*, wrote to Harry Price stating, “Our clients consider the article in question highly defamatory and injurious to its reputation, and unless an immediate retraction and apology is made by you, we are instructed to commence proceedings in respect

⁷⁸ The headline in the *Liverpool Echo* on March 16, 1937, read: “Fight With ‘Spirit’. Amazing Story of Séance. Fraud Charge. Naval Officer’s Widow and Medium.” The *Gloucester Citizen*, June 17, 1937, ran with “Séance Struggle with a ‘Spirit’. Medium Charged with Fraud.” Perhaps more sensational was the headline in the *Sydenham, Forest Hill & Penge Gazette*, June 18, 1937: “Woman Says a ‘Spirit’ Hit Her at Séance. Alleged Fraud Sensation. Evidence of Tussle in Darkened Room. ‘Indian’ Apparition.”

⁷⁹ J.H. Roycroft to Harry Price, February 26, 1938. Harry Price archives, Special Collections & Archives, Senate House Library, University of London, HPB/2/4.

of the said article.”⁸⁰ This was soon followed by a notice published in *Psychic News* on March 19, 1938, informing its readers of the same. A volley of correspondence was then sent between Price, the lawyer for the newspaper F.W. Scorah, the Managing Director of the *Sheffield Telegraph* H.J. Staines, and Barbanell’s legal team Henderson & Simmons. Barbanell claimed that Price was attacking *Psychic News* with his comments about the £100 raised for the convicted medium; however, Harry Price stated, “I reiterate that the article in question was not directed against any particular person or journal.” In fact, Price noted that he was referring to spiritualists in general who were raising the funds.⁸¹

It was clear that F.W. Scorah of Arthur Neal, Scorah & Co., was not worried about the threat of libel action from Barbanell. Scorah wrote to Price, “I have perused the articles and their complaint and, in my view, as the matter stands now, there is nothing which the *Sheffield Telegraph* should apologize for, and I doubt whether any proceedings will be taken.”⁸² It does not appear that Harry Price was concerned with the threat of legal action from Maurice Barbanell. Price knew about Barbanell’s ongoing hearings with Dr. Nandor Fodor and The Zomahs. Zomah, whose real name was Alfred Giddings, had telephoned Price on March 28, 1938, informing him that a colleague at the Institute of Magicians was having a “quarrel” and that this unnamed man had “started an action to recover his money” and was aware of the predicament that Harry Price had found himself in and added, “if anything

⁸⁰ Henderson & Simmons to Harry Price, n.d. Harry Price archive, Special Collections & Archives, Senate House Library, University of London, HPB/2/4.

⁸¹ Harry Price to H.J. Staines, March 24, 1938. Harry Price archives, Special Collections & Archives, Senate House Library, University of London, HPB/2/4.

⁸² F.W. Scorah to Harry Price, n.d. Harry Price archives, Special Collections & Archives, Senate House Library, University of London, HPB/2/4.

comes of the matter, he could probably help us with some ‘inside information’.” The unnamed man Price referred to was likely J.M. Rubens, one of the co-founders of *Psychic News* and a member of the Institute of Magicians.⁸³ Price stated that “he [Zomah’s colleague] made this offer of his own volition, and I thought it important enough to pass on to you. Of course, he and Barbanell are not now friendly.”⁸⁴ In fact, Harry Price sent Zomah a copy of the article after their telephone call, to which Alfred Giddings replied:

I have read the Article very carefully and in my mind there is nothing libellous even if there were defamatory statements, they are certainly true and truth is the best defence where there is no malice and in any case it is only fair comment, for undoubtedly these Mediums who were convicted were frauds. If I had written the Article I should not be afraid of any action they might take.⁸⁵

Was Harry Price worried about the potential legal action instituted against him by Maurice Barbanell? Writing to his solicitor, George Mant, Price was “quite prepared to make a statement for publication, that Psychic News was not in my mind when I wrote the article. This could hardly be construed into being an ‘apology’.” Mant wrote the same day to Henderson & Simmons, repeating that his client “had no particular person, country or journal in mind” and that Price “emphatically denies that any part of the article was directed against your Clients.”⁸⁶ Further, the lawyers for the *Sheffield Telegraph* informed George Mant that if Maurice Barbanell failed to launch the case as threatened, they would advise their clients to

⁸³ The exact nature of the issue between Maurice Barbanell and J.M. Rubens is not known. However, it is not difficult to imagine that a falling out took place owing to the legal case between the Zomahs and Barbanell.

⁸⁴ Harry Price to H.J. Staines, March 28, 1932. Harry Price archives, Special Collections & Archives, Senate House Library, University of London, HPB/2/4.

⁸⁵ A. Zomah to Harry Price, March 31, 1938. Harry Price archives, Special Collections & Archives, Senate House Library, University of London, HPC/4B/279.

⁸⁶ George Mant to Henderson & Simmons, March 29, 1938. Harry Price archives, Special Collections & Archives, Senate House Library, University of London, HP/2/4.

take legal action against *Psychic News*, “for the publication of the threat to take proceedings which appeared in a prominent place in their issue.”⁸⁷

As much as we do not know if Harry Price was worried, we do not know whether Maurice Barbanell had received, or was aware of, the counter-threat. The paper trails between all the parties involved end with no indication of a legal resolution to the case. However, on April 9, 1938, *Psychic News* published a story on its front page titled “Harry Price, Challenged by Us, Runs Away. Says He Was Not Attacking ‘Psychic News.’” The article, which ran over two pages, detailed an account of what transpired between them, Price, and the lawyers. Yet, they were adamant that *Psychic News* was referenced by Harry Price as they claimed they were the only newspaper to raise £100 for Clive Homes. “Still, when challenged, Price ran away,” ended the article.⁸⁸

William Roy, His Wife, and a Horsewhip Beating.

In 1948, two years after Maurice Barbanell had resigned from *Psychic News*, the newspaper published a story about the direct-voice medium, William Roy, whose legal name was William Plowright. Roy had been written about before in the newspaper with accounts from sitters at his séances and notices advertising his public demonstrations of mediumship or leadership of various groups’ séances around London. However, the article in 1948 detailed how two anonymous medical doctors had attended a William Roy séance. The doctors sat on either side of the medium, and “both of Roy’s hands were held and, in

⁸⁷ Arthur Neal, Scorch & Co., to George A. Mant, March 30, 1938. Harry Price archives, Special Collections & Archives, Senate House Library, University of London, HP/2/4.

⁸⁸ “Harry Price, Challenged by Us, Runs Away. Says He Was Not Attacking ‘Psychic News,’” *Psychic News*, April 9, 1938, 1-2.

addition, one doctor had his hand over the medium's mouth." The doctors also attested that the voices of spirits heard during the séance did not come from the medium and that "there was no movement of the medium's larynx during the manifestation of spirit voice." The article further reported that during another séance with William Roy, spirit trumpets moved around the room, and spirits spoke in Yiddish and French, presumably languages unknown to the medium. It was reported that during this additional séance, "the medium came out of trance groaning and it appears that one of the sitters had kicked out when his foot was grasped by a hand. Several sitters stated that they had been touched on the knee or face."⁸⁹

Roy Stemman noted that Maurice Barbanell "was very proud of the fact that he was exposing people [fraudulent mediums]." Stemman remembered that while most people would have pictures of loved ones on display, Barbanell had a cheque on his bookcase "for a very small amount, but it was for some sort of legal action."⁹⁰ As editor of *Two Worlds*, Barbanell continued speaking out against mediums acting fraudulently, and William Roy came under fire. In August 1955, duty-bound to denounce fraudulent practices within physical mediumship, Barbanell wrote: "To warn newcomers, we print the names of four mediums who have been exposed to fraud yet who still continue to give sittings. They are CHARLES J. BASHAM, ARTHUR PHILLIPS, WILLIAM ROY, JOHN SCAMMEL." Barbanell acknowledged that the situation was difficult as some, if not all, of the men listed, had some level of genuine psychic ability. However, the editor strongly felt that "we have

⁸⁹ "Doctors Test William Roy. Yiddish and French Spoken at a Second Séance," *Psychic News*, March 6, 1948, 7.

⁹⁰ Roy Stemman, Interview with Roy Stemman., interview by Nick Richbell, October 27, 2022.

always taken the stand that when mediums have been caught cheating, publicity should be given to that fact, and no references made afterwards in print to their names, even if readers send accounts containing examples of psychic evidence obtained through them afterwards.”⁹¹

When asked about Barbanell’s libel cases, Roy Stemman said, “The one that sticks out was the one where he [Barbanell] was hit with a horsewhip.”⁹² On August 26, 1955, Maurice Barbanell, as he was leaving his office in Central London, was physically attacked by Mrs. Mary Plowright, the wife of William Roy. Mrs. Plowright hit Barbanell several times with a horsewhip, an act of violence that brought her before a magistrate the following day. The *Coventry Evening Telegraph* reported, “A police officer came along and told her to desist. Mrs. Plowright was in such an agitated state, however, that she had to be arrested. She struck Mr. Barbanell three or four times across the back and legs.” The magistrate was informed by the police officer that Mrs. Plowright was “worked up” over the libel action her husband was taking against Barbanell. Mrs. Plowright responded to the charge: “I am sorry for causing all this trouble, but I am not sorry for what I did to Mr. Barbanell.” The accused was fined £3.00 and told by the magistrate, “You are old enough to know better, and have had sufficient education to know what you can do and what you cannot.”⁹³ This assault made the headlines across the United Kingdom, with newspapers publishing stories such as “Hunting Crop Attack On Editor” and “Woman ‘lay in wait,’ then – ‘set about’ editor with

⁹¹ “Mediums who have been exposed in fraud,” *Two Worlds*, August 15, 1955.

⁹² Stemman, Interview with Roy Stemman.

⁹³ “Woman Struck Editor with Hunting Crop. I Am Not Sorry, She Says,” *Coventry Evening Telegraph*, August 27, 1955, 1.

hunting crop.”⁹⁴ By October 1, 1955, a writ for libel had been issued against Maurice Barbanell by William Roy.⁹⁵

The public side to the William Roy libel case against Maurice Barbanell fell silent after news of the writ being served was announced in 1955. The silence, however, was broken in February 1958 when Barbanell published an article in *Two Worlds* informing readers that William Roy had discontinued the lawsuit against the newspaper and had also agreed to pay the newspaper's costs. The article, written by Maurice Barbanell, recounted the reasons for denouncing Roy and the three other mediums a few years before and also added details about the attack Barbanell sustained at the hands of William Roy's wife: "It's timing was staged by some accomplice...who telephoned me to make an appointment late that evening to show what he said were remarkable spirit pictures, so that I would be available for the 'assault.'" Barbanell wrote that he and *Two Worlds* were ready to defend themselves against Roy's legal action, stating they had witnesses who would support their claims as they had attended Roy's séances. The newspaper also had in its possession a variety of tools that the medium used to fake his mediumistic performances.⁹⁶

The following day, Victor Sims, writing for the *Sunday Pictorial*, published an article titled, "Wires up his trousers. The kit of a medium who fooled widows." Taking information published in *Two Worlds*, Sims informed readers of the tricks used by Roy, including the

⁹⁴ "Hunting Crop Attack on Editor," *Halifax Evening Courier*, August 27, 1955, 2, and "Woman 'Lay in Wait,' then 'Set About' Editor with Riding Crop," *Lancashire Evening Post*, August 27, 1955, 1.

⁹⁵ "Medium Sues Editor," *Psychic News*, October 1, 1955, 3.

⁹⁶ The Editor, "William Roy Drops Lawsuit Against Two Worlds. He Undertakes to Pay Our Costs. Sequel to 'Exposed in Fraud' Article," *Two Worlds*, February 22, 1958, 1-2.

accomplice who rummaged through séance attendees' belongings when they sat in the darkened room. The accomplice, who confessed these tricks to *Two Worlds*, transmitted the information to Roy via a small microphone connected to him via his trousers. Calling Roy a "self-confessed charlatan," Sims ended his article by telling the medium to "get out of this business – and leave the field to sincere researchers." The next issue of *Two Worlds* continued to report on this case that had caught the public's attention. Maurice Barbanell reported how the story had been told in the *Sunday Pictorial* publishing Roy's confession "'Of Course I Am a Phoney' 'It is true that I tricked women at séances'" as its headline. The spiritualist newspaper also reported that William Roy's public voice séances had been abandoned because "the strain of these days has been too great to expect successful demonstrations by Mr. Roy at this present time."

The subsequent articles published over a number of weeks in the *Sunday Pictorial* can only be described as sensational: William Roy began his confession.⁹⁷ With headlines such as "Unmasked," "This will ruin breakfast for many 'mediums.'" and "I cheat the experts," Roy told how he earned £50,000 and luxury gifts and was able to "profit from the purses, pockets, and bank accounts of those who believed in my power." He pretended to talk to the deceased loved ones of "victims I made happy as well as poor." Roy also admitted to using index cards full of information about his sitters, as Lamar Keene admitted to using in the 1970s at Camp Chesterfield, allowing the medium to work "without relying on the 'other world'" to "startle my audience in the dark." William Roy also confessed to tricking the

⁹⁷ Edmunds, *Spiritualism: A Critical Survey*, 118.

Prime Minister of Canada, William Lyon Mackenzie King, at sittings he gave when King visited England during the Second World War. Although King has become infamous for his interest in Spiritualism, Roy claimed that “everything was done with the greatest secrecy because Mr. Mackenzie King felt that certain sections of religious opinion back home might be upset if they knew he consulted mediums.” Roy said he didn’t use his usual tricks of wires and accomplices to fool the Prime Minister. Instead, Roy used a telescopic rod to attach string to a spirit trumpet to make it move around the séance room. Even more sensational was Roy’s claim that he impersonated the voice of Queen Victoria leaving King “apparently well satisfied and a fee of £20 was paid.”⁹⁸ *Two Worlds*, again in an article published on the front page and written by Maurice Barbanell, accused Roy of lying about his encounters with Mackenzie King.⁹⁹

Maurice Barbanell, having returned to *Psychic News*, published another front-page article about William Roy in 1969. It was discovered that even after admitting to working fraudulently, William Roy was still working as a medium, this time under the name of “Bill Silver.” Barbanell wrote that *Psychic News* had received reports over the years that Roy was still working, despite his pledge not to do so after the 1958 confession and having left the country then. The article even mentioned that the Beatles had attended sittings with

⁹⁸ “I Cheat the Experts,” *Sunday Pictorial*, April 13, 1958, 12-13. William Lyon Mackenzie King’s interest and participation in Spiritualism has been explored by C.P. Stacey, *A Very Double Life. The Private World of Mackenzie King* (Toronto: Macmillan, 1976) as well as in the two-volume *The Spiritualist Prime Minister* by Anton Wagner (White Crow Books in Association with the Survival Research Institute of Canada, anticipated Spring 2024).

⁹⁹ Maurice Barbanell, “Did William Roy Fool Canada’s Premier? Fake Medium’s Story Is Full of Loopholes,” *Two Worlds*, April 19, 1958, 1.

Roy/Silver, but it was not known if they accepted that “their communications came from their ‘dead’ manager, Brian Epstein.” Barbanell went so far as to ask if Roy would “be prosecuted under the Fraudulent Mediums Act,” or, “be charged with perjury, for which the maximum penalty is seven years’ imprisonment, a fine, or both.”¹⁰⁰ It does not appear that anything within a legal context happened to him. William Roy died in 1977, and Maurice Barbanell did not miss a last chance to throw scorn on the life and career of this fraudulent medium, ending two-pages of articles repeating all the tricks Roy confessed to with the words, “in Spiritualism’s long history there has never been a greater villain. He is now in a world where he cannot cheat.”¹⁰¹

Maurice Barbanell was described as “the loudest voice in spiritualism.” Undoubtedly, he was a staunch defender of Spiritualism and of the mediums he believed to be genuine.¹⁰² His position as editor of two of the leading psychic newspapers of the time gave him a platform to become embroiled in arguments that either took place in the court of law or the court of public opinion, and he was not one to shy away from the publicity they brought, whether he won or lost. However, it was possibly not the cases detailed in this chapter that troubled Barbanell the most; his long-running issues with organized religion were perhaps more significant consternation to him, as the following chapter will discuss.

¹⁰⁰ Maurice Barbanell, “Self-Confessed Fake Medium William Roy Works as Bill Silver. Beatles Went to His Séance,” *Psychic News*, May 24, 1969, 1.

¹⁰¹ “Resumed Séances as ‘Bill Silver’,” *Psychic News*, August 13, 1977, 5.

¹⁰² Edmunds, *Spiritualism: A Critical Survey*, 89.



Figure 1.1 Maurice Barbanell circa thirty-two-years old.



Figure 1.2 Sylvia and Maurice Barbanell.



Figure 1.3 The Barbanell's apartment was the four windows seen next to the main entrance to the building. Hundreds of séances took place in this home. Number 8, Adelaide Court, St. John's Wood, London.



Figure 1.4 Hannen Swaffer, the ‘Pope of Fleet Street’ and long-time friend and collaborator of Maurice Barbanell.

**EXCHANGE CINEMA,
TO-MORROW (SUNDAY), SEPT. 22nd,
Spiritualism Expounded
BY
Maurice Barbanell, Esq.,
AND
Hannen Swaffer, Esq.,
Of London.**

**Chair to be taken by E. J. WRIGHT, Esq.,
J.P., of Northampton.**

All are Welcome. Silver Collection.

Clairvoyance Given.

Doors Open 7.30. Commence 8 p.m.

Figure 1.5 Advertisement for a lecture by Maurice Barbanell and Hannen Swaffer during their propaganda tour of the United Kingdom. The *Daily Echo*. September 21, 1929.

PSYCHIC NEWS

Psychic News

No. 1] SATURDAY, MAY 28, 1932 [Price TWOPENCE

"I CHALLENGE THE 'DAILY MAIL'"

By HANNEN SWAFFER

To the Editor of the "Daily Mail."

You have recently performed such a great service to Spiritualism that I want you to go on with your good work.

Because you said of Mrs. Meurig Morris, on a poster, "Tance Medium Found Out," there was a long trial which gave great publicity to the claims of proved survival. These claims, these proofs, usually obtain little notice in the Press unless somebody is accused of fraud or trickery.

You published an article "exposing" Mrs. Meurig Morris.

I Challenge You to expose Mrs. Champion de Crespigny, the honorary principal of the British College of Psychic Science, of 12, Queen's Gate, London, S.W.7. Her telephone number is Western 3981.

Mrs. de Crespigny appeared as a witness for Mrs. Meurig Morris, with the result that law journals which cannot be accused of a Spiritualistic bias, complimented her upon her evidence.

"We find for the defendants on the plea of fair comment on a matter of public interest, but we do not consider that any allegations of fraud or dishonesty have been proved."

Meurig Morris case.

Now, Mrs. Champion de Crespigny, who belongs to a family very well known in England, and who is the widow of a naval officer, advertises publicly that she is making private appointments for seven trance mediums, with one clairvoyant and psychometrist, with two clairvoyants, with one mental medium, with one healer, who also does diagnosis, with one psychic photographer, and with two mediums who use what is called a reflectograph.

Now, some of the mediums are very well known. Hope, the psychic photographer, for instance, is vouched for by E. J. Crawley, Chief Constable of Newcastle, who has tested him with his own camera. Although Hope merely stood by, psychic "extras" appeared on the plates. The Rev. F. C. Spurr, the well-known Baptist minister of Birmingham, tells me that, through Hope, of Crewe, he obtained a photograph of his small dead son, although Hope did not know him by name.

There are a lot of mediums for you to expose. Your reporter need only go to the British College of Psychic Science and make an appointment, and then expose as many mediums as he likes. Please send the same one as you sent last time. All the work of the British College of Psychic Science, with the exception of one paid secretary, is controlled by an honorary committee.

I Challenge You to expose the Marylebone Spiritualist Association,



Writes Weekly

and all of whose accounts are thoroughly analysed.

Some of these churches have been going on for forty years or more. All of them carry on mediumship, in spite of the fact that mediumship is illegal in this country. Not one of them has ever been prosecuted. No one would dare to prosecute them.

They spread from the north of Scotland to the south of England, and from Southend to the most westerly Wales. In some Welsh towns, the miners have built the churches themselves, in their spare time, being too poor to pay for labour.

I Challenge You to expose Mrs. St. Clair Stobart, the head of the Spiritualist Community, who at the Sunday services at the Grosvenor Hall, and all the week, has mediums comforting mourners. Healing, too, goes on.

Mrs. St. Clair Stobart is famous as the Woman on the Black Horse, who saved part of the Serbian Army in its great retreat during the war, and who is known as an authoress, poetess, and social worker.

I Challenge You to expose Dorothy Cummins, an automatic writer who recently, in semi-trance, wrote, in fifty-six hours, seventy-six thousand words of what purported to be an addition to the Acts of the Apostles, so true in all historical, doctrinal, and other evidential detail that Dr. Osterley, examining chaplain to the Bishop of London, has certified the veridical evidence they contain, and praised them because they were so "orthodox." Some of this writing, published under the title, "The Script of Ciochpas," was done in the study of the late Bishop of Kensington.

I Challenge You to expose Mrs. Hester Dowden, who wrote, at lightning speed, in the exact style of Oscar Wilde, a play which purported to be written by him, and which certainly, as far as I know—and I speak as a dramatic critic—could not be imitated by any writer of my acquaintance.

Now, when Clive Maskelyne, in 1925, was trying to obtain publicity for his conjuring tricks by making a proud boast that "a new campaign against Spiritualism is about to be undertaken by the Occult Committee of the Magic Circle," and went on to say, "Seances will be severely attended by members of the Committee, and the results made known at a public meeting, probably at the Royal Albert Hall, early in the New Year," Maskelyne did not take up our challenge.

He may have been only a conjurer, but he had too much sense for that.

I have not yet heard the results of his campaign, nor, so far as I can trace, did any public meeting take place—certainly not at the Royal Albert Hall.

We offer you, for exposure as many mediums as you like.

SCEPTIC CONVINCES HIMSELF

MAKES OWN CONDITIONS

After laughing, as people often do, at spirit photography, A. W. Palfrey, a parcels officer at the South-Western District Post Office, London, took six photographs of himself in the presence of J. Myers, a medium. He made the challenge and fixed his own conditions. The sitting took place in a front room at 37 Warwick Street, on Monday evening. The room was illuminated with a 250-volt electric lamp. There were eight people present besides myself.

At the beginning my own camera was focused on the sitters. I went into the dark room, broke the seals, and loaded six dark slides. I then returned, inserted a slide, withdrew the sheath, and retired to the door where everyone in the room was visible. The medium released the shutter, I closed the slide and withdrew it, this was kept in my possession, and the same operation performed each time. After the exposure of the third plate I exchanged my camera for that of the medium. After the six plates were exposed, I took the slides into a dark room and by the aid of a photographic lamp, developed, fixed, and washed the plates. The result was that two plates had "extras."

I should like to state that all my conditions (to avoid deception) were willingly accepted.

(Sgd.) A. W. PALFREY, Parcel Office.

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Figure 1.6 Frontpage of the first issue of *Psychic News*, May 28, 1932.



Figure 1.7 Maurice Barbanell during a propaganda talk in Hyde Park, London. 1930s.



Figure 2.1 Madam Zomah, 1917.



Figure 2.2 Alfred Giddings (Mr. Zomah).



Figure 2.3 Harry Price, “debunker” of psychical phenomena.



Figure 2.4 William Roy, circa 1948. Roy's wife went on to beat Maurice Barbanell in the street with a horsewhip following accusations of fraudulent mediumship against her husband.

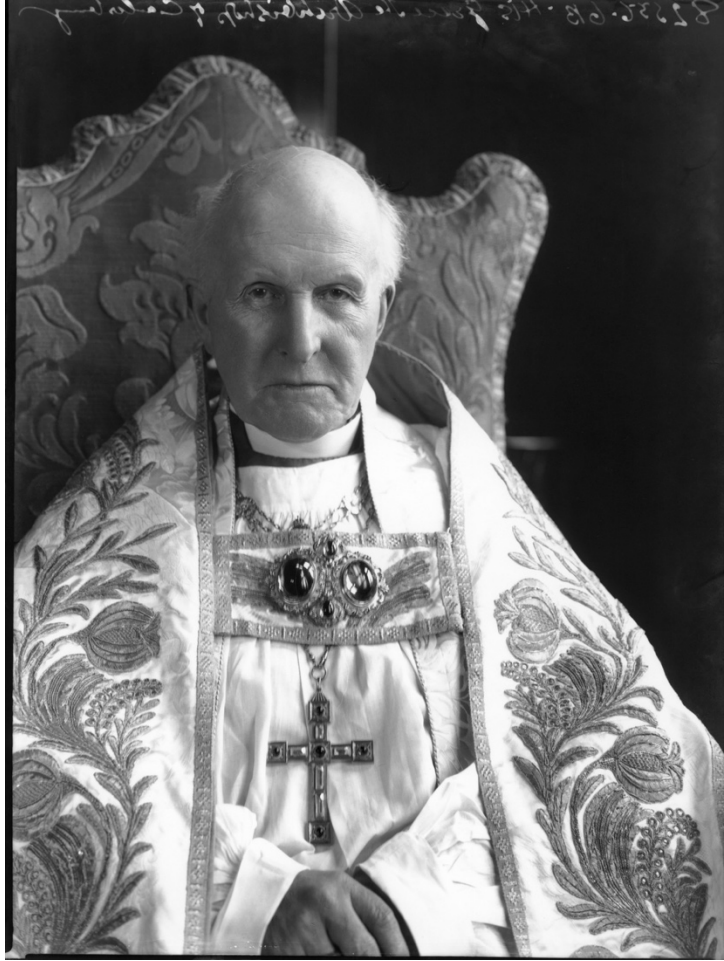


Figure 3.1 Archbishop of Canterbury, Cosmo Gordon Lang.

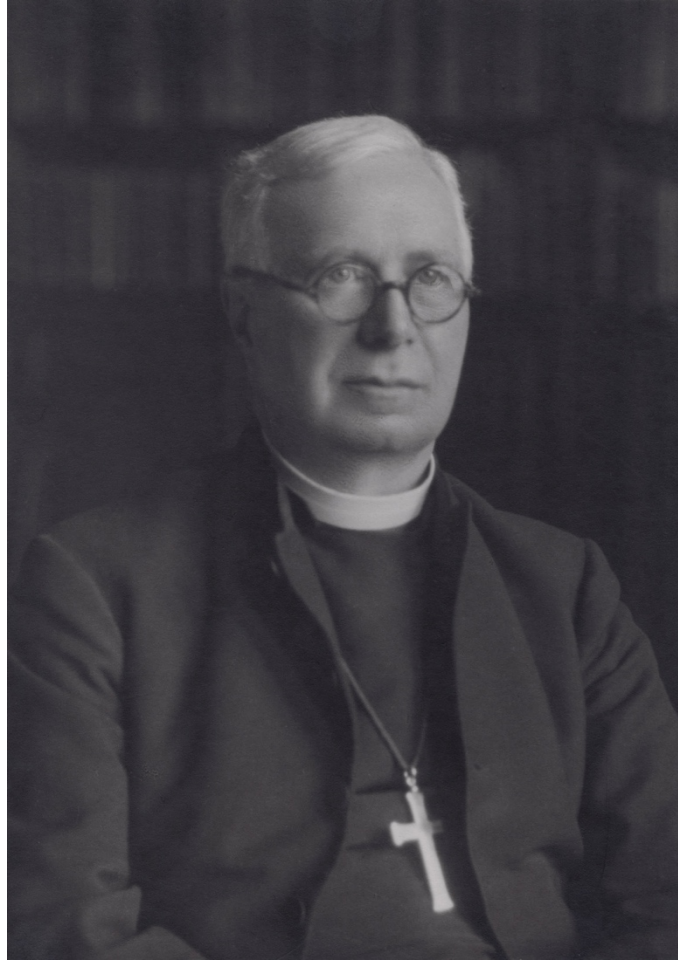


Figure 3.2 Francis Underhill, Bishop of Bath and Wells. Underhill was the Chairman of the Archbishop's Committee on Spiritualism.

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AFTER
DEATH
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Psychic News

The Spiritualist Newspaper With The World's Largest Net Sale
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ARCHBISHOP'S REPORT



DR. COSMO LANG
Instituted the committee, then
refused to publish its findings

The Bishops Kept It Secret For 9 Years!

**WE DISCLOSE FINDINGS OF THE
COMMITTEE ON SPIRITUALISM**



DR. WILLIAM TEMPLE
"I took a foremost part in urging
the report should not be published"

Exclusive To "Psychic News"

THE PUBLICATION OF THIS SECRET DOCUMENT IS AN INDICATION OF THE CONTINUING ADVANCE OF SPIRITUALISM. IT IS PART OF THE REPORT SUBMITTED TO DR. LANG, THEN ARCHBISHOP OF CANTERBURY, BY THE COMMITTEE OF PROMINENT CLERGY AND LAYMEN OF THE CHURCH OF ENGLAND, APPOINTED BY HIM TO INQUIRE INTO SPIRITUALISM.

LARGELY AT THE INSTIGATION OF DR. TEMPLE, THEN ARCHBISHOP OF YORK AND LATER OF CANTERBURY, THE HOUSE OF BISHOPS DECIDED AGAINST ITS PUBLICATION—AND THE RANK AND FILE OF THE CHURCH WERE ROBBED OF SORELY-NEEDED GUIDANCE IN THIS MOST IMPORTANT SUBJECT.

IF THIS REPORT HAD BEEN PUBLISHED IN 1938, WHEN IT WAS PREPARED AND SUBMITTED,

OR EVEN IN 1940, WHEN IT WAS FINALLY AND OFFICIALLY SUPPRESSED, I BELIEVE THE CONTROVERSY THAT IS NOW RAGING ROUND THE OPINIONS OF THE BISHOP OF BIRMINGHAM—A

BY THE EDITOR

CONTROVERSY THAT IS DOING THE CHURCH INCALCULABLE HARM—WOULD HAVE BEEN AVOIDED.

INSTEAD OF BEING DIVIDED IN THEIR LOYALTY TO THE CHURCH AND THEIR OWN COMMONSENSE, ANGLICANS WOULD HAVE REALISED THAT PSYCHIC SCIENCE CONTAINS THE KEY TO THE MYSTERY OF THE NEW TESTA-

MENT "MIRACLES." THEY WOULD NOT HAVE TO CHOOSE BETWEEN SCIENCE AND FAITH, FOR THEIR FAITH WOULD BE FORTIFIED BY THE KNOWLEDGE THAT PRESENT-DAY "MIRACLES" CONFIRM THOSE OF THE PAST.

THE SECTION OF THE REPORT WHICH WE PRINT IS THAT CONTAINING THE "CONCLUSIONS OF THE MAJORITY" OF THE COMMITTEE. IT WAS SIGNED BY SEVEN OF THE TEN MEMBERS; THE OTHER THREE SUBMITTED A MINORITY REPORT WHICH IS STILL SECRET.

I CONSIDER IT MY DUTY TO PUBLISH THIS REPORT, IN DEFIANCE OF THE BISHOPS WHO BANNED IT—NOT SO MUCH TO SATISFY THE NATURAL CURIOSITY OF SPIRITUALISTS, BUT TO GIVE ANGLICAN PARSONS AND LAYMEN THE LEAD THAT WAS DENIED THEM BY THEIR OWN LEADERS.

"CONCLUSIONS OF THE MAJORITY"

IN interpreting our evidence, it is important to take into account the theories, prevalent among the more experienced and careful Spiritualists, as to the nature and the value of the alleged messages delivered through the agency of mediums.

It is pointed out, on the evidence of the "communicators" themselves, that the communicators and guides are themselves at very different levels of spiritual development and of very partial knowledge, and that the "controls" of which they make use may often be very undeveloped personalities who are capable of this particular service because they are closely linked with temporarily dissociated portions of the personality of the mediums concerned.

There are thus at least three factors which would render messages, especially those of a high order of spiritual or metaphysical value, liable to dis-

turbance, and which lead to the difficulties, generally recognised by Spiritualists, which the communicators would in any case find in transmitting messages which do not already lie within the general conditions of our knowledge.

There is, however, nothing inherently contradictory, or necessarily improbable in this account of the conditions involved in such communications. It is, however, no more than an hypothesis, incapable of scientific proof, nor does it assist us in determining the authenticity of the communications themselves.

The verification of these, if it is possible at all, must rest upon ordinary scientific tests. To say this is not, however, to deny that the communications may sometimes be held to be convincing upon other than scientific grounds.

In any case it seems necessary to distinguish between the sense

of contact with departed friends or with "guides," and the assurance that messages have necessarily any high value because they come through this unusual channel.

THE SEVEN SIGNATORIES

Dr. Francis Underhill
Bishop of Bath and Wells
Dr. W. R. Matthews
Dean of St. Paul's
Canon Harold Anson
Master of the Temple
Canon L. W. Grended
Nolloth Professor of the
Christian Religion at Oxford
Dr. William Brown
Celebrated Harley Street
Psychologist
Mr. P. E. Sandlands, K.C.
Barrister-at-law
Lady (Gwendolen)
Stephenson

It is perhaps of some importance to notice that there is general agreement in the communications that time has not the same rigid character as a "time-series" in the life that lies beyond death. This is in any case probable on other grounds, but it is of interest as indicating a possible reason why the communicators are frequently confused or mistaken as to exact indications of time.

This may not be a failure in their own apprehension of the real significance of events, so much as in their power of conveying that apprehension in a form which can be adapted to the mentality of the medium and to the understanding of those to whom the message is directed.

It is often urged as of great significance that Spiritualism in many respects re-affirms the highest convictions of religious people, and that it has

brought many to a new assurance of the truth of teaching which had ceased to have any meaning to them.

This is a point of some difficulty, since assurance seems to come along different and even conflicting lines. We cannot ignore the fact that at least one considerable Spiritualist organisation is definitely anti-Christian in character. This divergence of testimony is explained by Spiritualists as due to the continuance of spirits, at least for a period, within the system of beliefs which they have held in this life.

It is held that even though the whole development of the personality is being raised from level to level, the attitudes to truth and goodness taken up in this life persist in the next, and that this somewhat divergent testimony to the truth of Christianity must be explained in this way.

(Turn to page 5)

Figure 3.3 Frontpage of the issue of *Psychic News* that disclosed the leaked findings of the Archbishop's Committee on Spiritualism's Report.

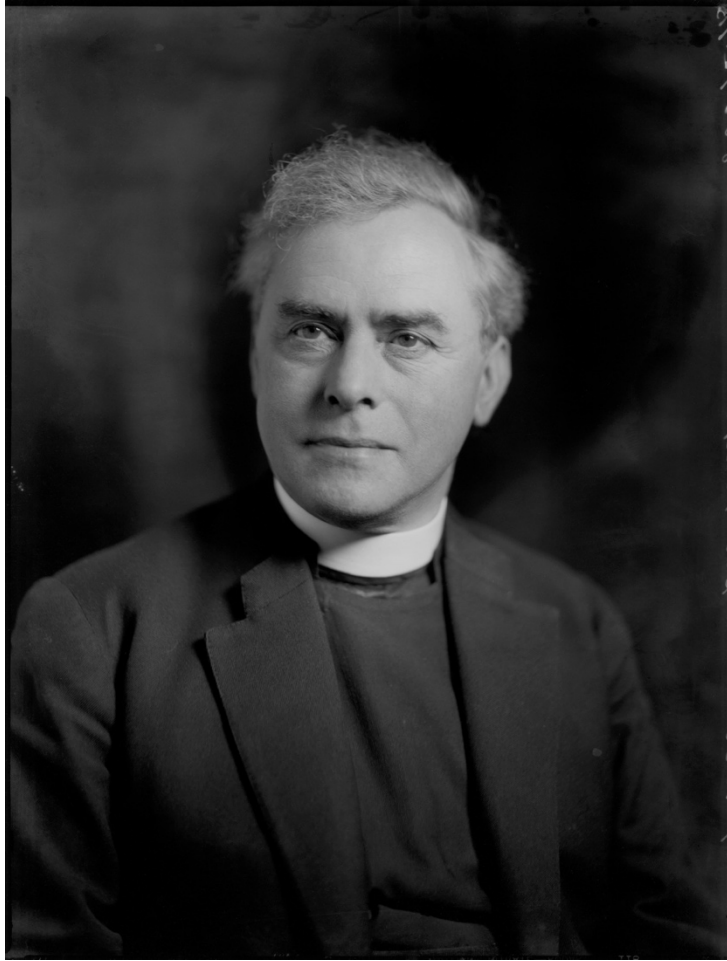


Figure 3.4 Walter Robert Matthews, member of the Archbishop's Committee on Spiritualism, December 9, 1935.

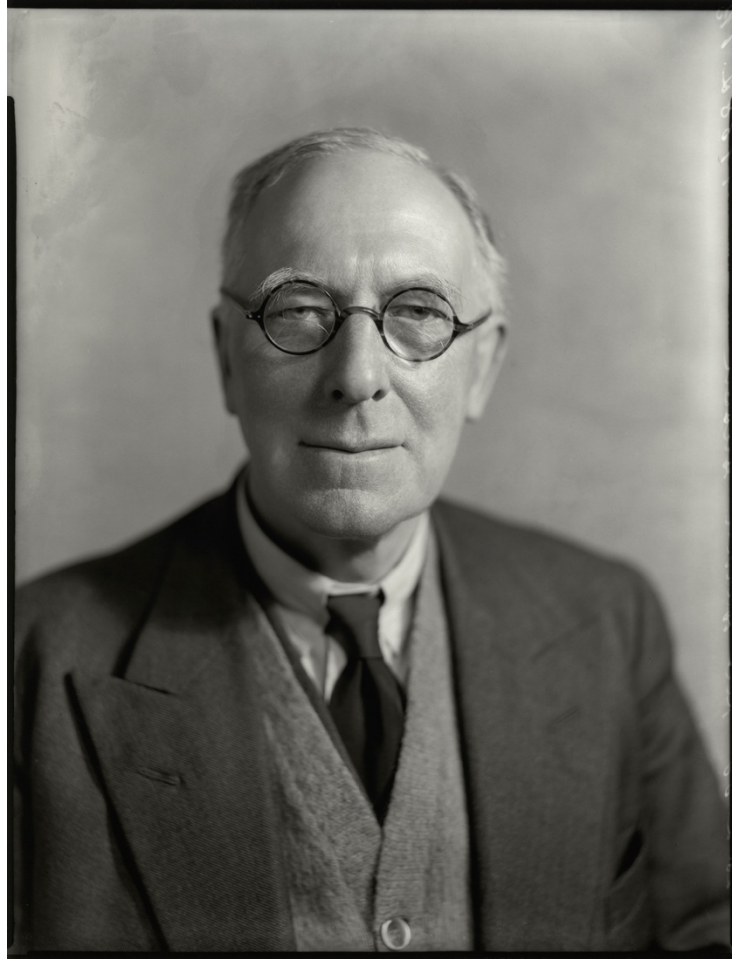


Figure 3.5 Canon Harold Anson, member of the Archbishop's Committee on Spiritualism, February 28, 1935.



Figure 4.1 Spirit portrait of Silver Birch, the guide of Maurice Barbanell, by Marcel Poncin.

PSYCHIC NEWS

Psychic News

THE SPIRITUALIST NEWSPAPER WITH THE WORLD'S LARGEST CIRCULATION
(ON SALE EVERY THURSDAY)

**LIFE
AFTER
DEATH
PROVED**

No. 309

LONDON: APRIL 23, 1938
(Registered at the G.P.O. as a Newspaper)

Price TWOPENCE



RED CLOUD

Probably the best-known guide in Spiritualism, Red Cloud, through his medium, Estelle Roberts, has been responsible for bringing our truths to thousands. His world-famous voice circles have brought comfort to scores of mourners. His healing successes have astonished medical men. His apports are treasured as souvenirs by his earthly helpers, who regard him as their guide, philosopher and friend. Red Cloud is a lovable and inspiring personality. This picture of him appeared on a plate held by Madge Donohoe.

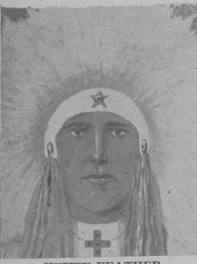
FAMOUS INDIAN GUIDES OF SPIRITUALISM

"Despised Savages" Who Are Helping To Save The World



WHITE HAWK

This noble and eloquent spirit guide has given enough apports to his friends to fill a large museum. For nearly twenty years he has worked through his "coat"—the name he uses for his medium—Kathleen Barkel. White Hawk's seances are never solemn or pompous. He is full of wit and his laughter is infectious. Dozens of highly placed personages have visited his medium in secret, and White Hawk has proved our truths to them. As a healer, and as a teacher he has rightly earned distinction. The illustration is a spirit photo.



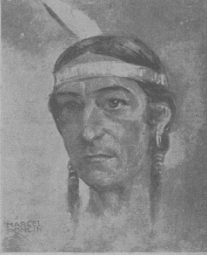
WHITE FEATHER

In one year White Feather, through his medium, Thomas Wyatt, gave 3,500 treatments to patients who crowded to his seances, and not one of them was charged a penny. This guide trained nineteen assistants to help him in his healing work. The co-operation between the spirit and his medium was so successful that Wyatt's rise to the front rank in the movement was meteoric. He, too, has specialised in the great task of comforting the bereaved. Frank Leah, the psychic artist, drew this picture.



WHITE EAGLE

This spirit guide of Bertha Hirst was painted by Marcel Poncin, the famous French artist. At a recent seance White Eagle asked the artist to paint his portrait and promised to impress him with his likeness. Until a short time ago, Poncin was unaware of his ability to execute psychic pictures.



SILVER BIRCH

This Indian spirit guide, of Hannen Swaffer's home circle, has endeared himself to thousands all over the world for the nobility and simplicity of his teachings. His eloquent words have brought comfort, hope and inspiration to people who have never met him, but who eagerly read his messages printed regularly in *Psychic News*. His mission is to expound the natural laws of the universe so that man may have a clearer understanding of his relationship to God and his purpose on earth. This picture is by Marcel Poncin.

Figure 4.2 Frontpage of *Psychic News* showcasing famous “Red Indian” spirit guides, including Silver Birch. April 23, 1938.

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Hon. Principal: Mrs. HEWAT MCKENZIE.
Secretary: Mrs. M. W. HANKEY.

LECTURE.
(Visitors, 1s.)
Wednesday, May 29th, at 8.15 p.m.
Mr. T. DUDLEY PARSONS.
"Red Indian Controls."

GROUP CLAIRVOYANCE.
(Members, 2s. 6d. Non-members 4s.)
(Eight sitters only. Seats must be booked.)
Friday, May 24th, at 5 p.m.
Miss A. GEDDES.
Monday, May 27th, at 3 p.m.
Mrs. BRITTAIN.
Friday, May 31st, at 5 p.m.
Mr. T. AUSTIN.

Write for Syllabus.

Figure 4.3 Advertisement for a lecture by Mr. T. Dudley Parsons on "Red Indian Controls."
Psychic News. May 25, 1935.

H.P.L. - Psychic

**You will
live after
you die**

Psychic News

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Maurice Barbanell passes

HIS SPIRIT PROMOTION COMES AFTER 61 YEARS OF PIONEERING SPIRITUALISM

by Tony Ortzen

MAURICE BARBANELL, PN's editor and founder, passed to the spirit world last week. Aged 79, he was working until only hours before his sudden promotion. His wife, Sylvia, was nearby.

Barbanell had been unwell since returning from a holiday in Formentor, Majorca, three weeks previously. He developed what at first seemed to be a minor chest infection. A heart attack caused his passing.

On Friday, Barbanell felt too unwell to attend the office. For the first time in literally decades he spent what would normally have been a hectic work day in bed.

Typically, his main concern was for PN. He arranged for stories he had dictated the previous day to be delivered to his St Johns Wood, NW London, flat, so that he could edit them. In addition he requested a set of galleys for "Two Worlds," our sister magazine. Barbanell wanted to proof read them.

When I spoke to the editor at 4.0pm on Friday, even over the telephone he was patently unwell. After having a light tea, he saw a physiotherapist at his home since his doctor thought that a massage would ease his chest complaint.

The physiotherapist was concerned when he saw Barbanell and suggested that a doctor be summoned. A local homeopathic medic examined Barbanell and suggested he should enter hospital.

Barbanell refused. He slumped back into his pillow and began his new life in the spirit world.

An ambulance was called. Resuscitation proved hopeless. Barbanell was rushed to Paddington General Hospital, Harrow Road, W London and taken to the intensive care unit, but pronounced medically dead.

A joyous welcome will have awaited Barbanell in the Beyond. Undoubtedly, among others to greet him will have been his much-loved guide, Silver Birch, Hannen Swaffer, and journalist Paul Miller. Both the latter played major roles in PN's early days.

I am equally certain that close friends like healer Harry Edwards and mediums Estelle Roberts, Lilian Bailey, Helen Hughes, and a host of others will have been on the Other Side welcoming committee.

Oddly enough, only a few weeks ago Barbanell described to me some of the harsh conditions under which he was raised in London's tough and deprived East End.

He was born on 3 May 1902. His father was a barber. Young Maurice had, among his duties, sweeping hair from the floor and acting as lather boy.

In addition, another task was to sew coins - I believe they were halfpennies - into small bags which were then placed in a lucky dip.

Barbanell's father also gave dental treatment in the days before such practitioners had to be registered.

The dental chair was kept in a bedroom which Barbanell shared with others. Often he was awakened at night as a patient with mouth problems sought help.

As requested in his will, Barbanell's earthly remains will be cremated. Vernon Moore, an ex-Methodist missionary and Hannen Swaffer Home Circle member for many years, will conduct the private funeral service on Saturday.

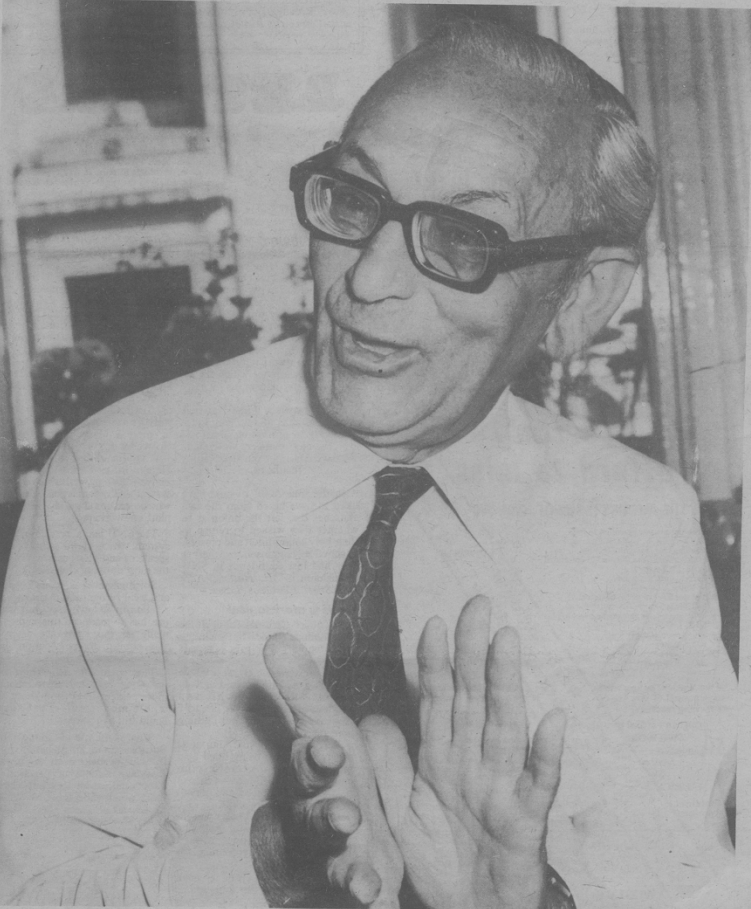
Only a few weeks ago the editor suggested to Gordon Higginson that he and Joe Benjamin demonstrate together. It is planned to hold a public memorial meeting for Barbanell. The date has yet to be arranged.

Some years ago the editor prepared his obituary and the background story to PN's founding. These accounts appear on pages 4 and 5.

Tributes from all Britain's major Spiritualist organisations have poured in and likewise appear in this edition.

Barbanell and his wife Sylvia would have celebrated their

☐ Continued on page 4, column 2



Maurice Barbanell, pictured in his office making a point when interviewed by a French journalist. In the past PN has occasionally appeared with a blue title. This always delighted Barbanell. This week, to honour and please him, we have chosen his favourite shade.

Figure 5.1 Issue of Psychic News announcing the death of Maurice Barbanell, published July 25, 1981.

Saturday, August 15, 1981

17p

Psychic News

Britain's only independent Spiritualist weekly
Founded in 1932 by Maurice Barbanell

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PN starts its new era

PN this week begins a new era. We have a new executive director, a new board member and a new editor. And even, as you see above, a new look title. But our main message, our paramount task, is still to present to the world the Spiritualist message, its philosophy and evidence.

M. H. Tester, who has been associated with PN for many years, last week became our executive director. A Psychic Press director, Tester will ensure that PN as a business operates unhampered by Maurice Barbanell's passing. Barbanell was also our managing director.

Tester, a former property magnate, is a spirit healer and successful author.

Laurie Wilson, whose father Percy was Psychic Press chairman, has been appointed a board member. He is a Spiritual Truth Foundation trustee.

To safeguard future

This registered charity – it operates from our address – was formed to safeguard PN's independence and further Spiritualism.

Our chairman is David Dutton, an excellent speaker.

Gordon Adams remains our company secretary. He has filled this capacity for 25 years.

New editor is Tony Ortzen. He was immediately appointed acting editor after Barbanell's sudden spirit world promotion.

PN will not be the mouthpiece for any single organisation or individual: we shall defend, fiercely, and forthrightly, our independence.

We will criticise but –

Naturally links with all the bodies within our movement, including non-Spiritualist ones, will be maintained and hopefully strengthened.

We shall criticise when we think a situation merits it. But any adverse comment will be constructive. A destructive line will never be taken. And, of course, we shall also compliment!

Though all shades of opinion will be allowed, welcomed and encouraged, PN's main task is to spread Spiritualism in a positive way. Ours is a unique message.

Spiritualists may be small in numbers, but our impact can be great in touching the souls of those in torment, helping the bereaved, and, by spirit healing, curing the sick, halt and lame.

Sceptics play part

Controversy will be encouraged, but not for its own sake. Even sceptics may be invited to contribute articles.

For example, if a Roman Catholic priest submits an anti-Spiritualist feature, it will be ably answered by a competent writer from within our ranks.

Spiritualism's message and evidence are so strong they need not fear attack, ridicule, or questioning. It is always good to hear another's viewpoint even if it is diametrically opposed to our own.

by Tony Ortzen

Articles from foreign publications will be permitted if, when translated, they are germane and of international interest.

In the past PN has received much criticism for automatically rewriting material that has already appeared in other national publications.

Hopefully, over the next few months this will cease. Stories from other newspapers, magazines and journals will appear only if they are of sufficient importance.

However, should a national paper or any other publication conduct, for example, what we consider an unfair feature about a medium or Spiritualism, we shall reply to it. Our sole object will be to present fairly our case.

Stories from local papers may appear in PN if they are of interest to readers outside a specific area.

It is hoped to ask a series of guest writers to submit, once monthly, an article on, say, psychometry, dowsing, etc.

Face will change

We shall select experts in various fields – provided their subjects are within PN's editorial orbit – and ask them to write a special article for PN. Please give us your suggestions.

Over coming weeks PN's face will change. We shall use bolder types and restock gradually our picture library. We shall try to make the layout exciting, but not sensational for its own sake, even though our basic message is sensational.

But, of course, you must play your part at this time in PN's exciting life. A paper is a living, breathing, child to those who produce it. It must be alive, vibrant, interesting.

Send us your stories. Already arrangements have been made, in part, to provide regional coverage.

PN is London-based, but we have devised a system to reach the entire country – and even abroad.

Stories are legion

A special form will be printed listing questions we would ask a person face to face in the office. A medium or healer will merely have to provide answers to these.

If you know of a worker whom you think deserves featuring, send us his or her name. We will supply him or her with a list to answer. Thus, with merely an envelope and stamp, PN can reach those toiling perhaps hundreds of miles away.

We will not feature people merely for their own vanity. They must have a story of interest to others – and the stories are surely legion.

Please do not send articles for publication which are outside our editorial premise. PN is constantly bombarded with animal welfare



Here you see only a part of PN's team. From left to right they are: Joe Lewis (circulation), Anne Dooley (editorial), Ron Baker (advertising and circulation manager), Gordon Adams (company secretary and bookshop manager), Kay Hunter (editorial), Dorothy Shaw (advertising) and Betty Edelston (bookshop). Editor Tony Ortzen is seated.

matter. Rightly, this cause is close to many Spiritualists' hearts.

But the many animal welfare societies can present their case far better than we can; they have their own experts and journals. In the same way, PN does not expect these publications to feature Spiritualism.

This is your paper; PN is merely composed of readers who are making news. It is for you.

If you have a good sitting or healing story, send it in. Guidelines are printed on page 8 concerning what makes a good article. Please do not feel hurt, rejected or dejected if we cannot use it.

Trust the professionals who are firmly steering PN. We may be young in years, but combined, and this is not to flatter ourselves, we have centuries of experience.

Many of PN's staff have been with the firm for years. We are building the future on our past. There have been mistakes: there will be mistakes, but it is by them we shall learn.

Naturally, there are other ways in which you can help PN. One idea is to order an extra copy, ask your newsagent to display it and pay for the issue only if it remains unsold.

If you go on holiday why not still have PN delivered and read it on returning?

Leave PN on buses, trains, in waiting rooms, and help to spread

Spiritualism's vital teachings. Ask your public library to display it in its reading room.

One of our main tasks is to increase circulation. If you have your copy second, third or fourth hand please consider buying your own. This is not simply to boost our income for materialistic reasons.

The greater our revenue, the more extensive can be our coverage. I know many readers exist on pensions, but you can still serve the movement by helping to boost PN.

Though PN's financial future is assured, with increased revenue we may be able to employ more editorial staff and expand the number of pages. Time will tell; you must play your part in making this possible.

Our budget has to exist within limits. The more we expand, the wider we can spread the net and send reporters to cover events. For example, if a European conference merits covering we may be able to do so.

Mediums and healers should not, out of modesty, feel embarrassed about sending PN accounts concerning themselves. But unsubstantiated stories will not appear.

However, PN introduced a strict rule a few months ago. We will not print stories concerning healing or seances telephoned from a medium's or healer's home.

A sitter is probably excited after

being reunited with "lost" loved ones. Let him or her get home or back to a hotel room before contacting PN. We are against mediums and healers breathing down people's necks as they contact PN.

If a sitting is good, it will still be so when the recipient gets home. But allow the person time to evaluate the full evidence first.

A delay of a few hours will make no difference to a successful sitting or healing. We are against hearing from recipients when they are excited and possibly a little emotional.

How you can help

Testimonials or confirmation must come from the sitter or cured patient concerned. This can be written, typed or telephoned to us. It is no use anyone claiming anything without back-up evidence.

You can aid us in other, smaller ways, too. If you write a "help" letter please enclose a SAE or International Reply Coupon.

Overseas readers can obtain these from Post Offices. Time is precious: please keep request letters brief and to the point.

You will get more attention writing a short letter than one 40 pages long with the main point in the last paragraph. And we do receive such communications!

Readers, this is your chance to tell us what you want, to make PN

your paper. Parish-pump articles will not be printed. Accounts must have an appeal to the whole country.

Now is your chance to help shape PN's future. Send us your comments, be they criticisms or compliments. It is only by reader feedback that we shall know if we are succeeding in our toils.

PN's former editor once said there were no famous people in Spiritualism. In a sense, he was right. There are those merely known better than others.

We shall practice no discrimination. There are no beggars, no kings. Naturally, some people, because even mediums have differing degrees of gifts, will make news more often than others.

In any society, leaders always rise to the top. This is a natural happening. Civilisation would not succeed without them.

But we shall not countenance a story simply because a "famous" worker is responsible; we are all equals in spreading our spirit truths.

Some will make more impact than others, but our columns will always be open to those who have never made news before – if the story justifies it.

Please give us your trust. We will not abuse it. We have made no hollow promises. Share our confidence of the future; help make that future; you are the future.

Figure 5.2 Psychic News announces its new era following the death of its founder, Maurice Barbanell. August 15, 1981.



Figure 5.3 Maurice Barbanell's Memorial was a sold-out event. *Psychic News*, October 31, 1981.



Figure 5.4 Maurice Barbanell.

Chapter 3

At War with the Churches.

The Spiritualist does not require the dubious authority of any holy books or sacred writings. He is indifferent to the fulminations of popes and primates. He does not require the crutches provided by creeds and dogmas. He is not awed by priestly vestments or clerical ceremonies.

*Psychic News*¹

Maurice Barbanell's relationship with organized religion was at best antagonistic, from his early experiences living in London with his family. Growing up with a devoutly Jewish mother and a father who was an atheist, Barbanell wrote that he was not involved with any religion. In his youth, Barbanell embraced his father's ideas about atheism. These mellowed into agnosticism, with a marked bias against Spiritualism."² Barbanell would often listen to his parents hold discussions about religion without ever reaching a mutual agreement on the subject, childhood experiences which helped form his outlook on religion.³ This continued throughout his life, with his introduction to Spiritualism at eighteen and deep commitment to the religion that stayed with him for the rest of his life. Maurice Barbanell's books and long career editing *Psychic News*, as explored in this chapter, demonstrate his knowledge of and disdain for orthodox religion. While we know that he would defend Spiritualism from perceived attacks, as discussed in Chapter 2, it is possible that owing to his upbringing, attacks from those within orthodox religion were more personal. Before looking at Barbanell's well-documented conflict with both the Church of England and the Roman

¹ "Unmoved," *Psychic News*, February 24, 1940, 4.

² Maurice Barbanell, *Power of the Spirit* (London: Psychic Press, Ltd., 1949), 13.

³ Maurice Barbanell, *This Is Spiritualism* (London: Spiritualist Press, 1959), 5.

Catholic Church, it is useful to consider the context of Spiritualism's relationship with religion in Britain after he discovered Spiritualism in 1920.

Spiritualism shares a common belief with other religions that the human soul survives physical death. The difference is that Christian churches teach that survival of death is a matter of faith and part of the church's dogma. In contrast, Spiritualists base their belief, or what they call "knowledge," on evidence mostly through messages that are communicated by mediums as they talk with the disembodied spirits of loved ones who are physically dead.⁴ Furthermore, Spiritualists believed, and continue to believe, that orthodox religion instills fear in its adherents with its teachings of "Hell, the Fall, and the Sacrifice of Christ," ideologies that are not part of Spiritualistic belief systems.⁵ Spiritualism follows no creed or dogma (to be discussed later in this chapter), there is no central Leader (for instance, as the Pope is for the Catholic Church), and there is no one book that Spiritualists are expected to follow. However, one cannot ignore that Spiritualist church members include many individuals who followed and some who continue to follow the Christian faith.

Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, raised in the Catholic tradition, "regarded Spiritualism as a vulgar delusion of the uneducated." It was not until he experienced spiritualistic phenomena for himself that he "recognised that the testimony was so strong that no other religious movement in the world could put forward anything to compare it with."⁶ Doyle, in *The New*

⁴ Geoffrey K. Nelson, *Spiritualism and Society* (New York: Schocken Books, 1969), 205-206.

⁵ Jenny Hazelgrove, *Spiritualism and British Society between the Wars*, Studies in Popular Culture (Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 2000), 54. See Hazelgrove's chapter, "Catholic connections, pp. 53-79," for her argument that the belief systems of Spiritualism and the Christian tradition, especially Catholicism, share more in common than either sect would care to admit to.

⁶ Arthur Conan Doyle, *The New Revelation* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1918), 18; Doyle, 23.

Revelation, stated that Spiritualism was not a threat to Christianity but something that could unite every religion. The doctor, author, and Spiritualist propagandist wrote that Christianity needed, however, to change with the times to stop losing its congregants, believing that “too much seemed to be made of Christ’s death.” More emphasis was needed on his life that was, “full of easy tolerance for others, of kindly charity, of broad-minded moderation, of gentle courage, always progressive and open to new ideas, and yet never bitter to those ideas which He was really supplanting.”⁷ In 1920, notices to “come and hear” Sir Arthur Conan Doyle speak about his “experiences” at a celebration of the 72nd anniversary of Spiritualism appeared in *Light* alongside advertisements for publications about “Psychic Research in the New Testament.”⁸ The same issue of *Light* also provided readers with an article about “The Churches and Psychic Research.”⁹ Indeed, Christianity, as understood within a Spiritualist context, was well covered in the estimated 5,000 books and several hundred Spiritualist journals published since Modern Spiritualism began in 1848, including many during Maurice Barbanell’s formative years in Spiritualism in the 1920s to 1940s.¹⁰ The authors covered topics ranging from psychic events in the Bible to Jesus himself being a medium.¹¹ Even

⁷ Doyle, *The New Revelation*, 56.

⁸ *Light*, March 13, 1920, ii.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ C.E. Bechofer (Carl Eric Bechofer) Roberts, *The Truth About Spiritualism* (London: Eyre and Spottiswoode, 1932), 15.

¹¹ For examples, see: Rev. E.W. Sprague, *All the Spiritualism of the Christian Bible and the Scripture Directly Opposing It* (Detroit: E. W. Sprague., 1922); Rev. E.W. Sprague, *Was Jesus of Nazareth God or Man, Christ or Spirit Medium? Let the Bible Decide* (Detroit: E. W. Sprague., 1922); Mrs. St. Clair Stobart, *The Either-Or of Spiritualism* (London: Rider & Co, 1928); Mrs. St. Clair Stobart, *Torchbearers of Spiritualism* (Port Washington, NY: Kennikat Press, 1971).

Silver Birch's teachings on religion included his explanation that God is the Great Spirit, described as

the natural law of the universe: the creative force behind all life, whether registered in the plane of matter or in the plane of spirit. The Great Spirit is perfect love and perfect wisdom...The Great Spirit fills all life. The Great Spirit is within all laws. The Great Spirit is the Great Spirit. He is life. He is love. He is everything.¹²

Of course, Maurice Barbanell was aware of these writings. From 1925 to 1981, Psychic Press and Psychic Book Club published at least eighty monographs concerned with the relationship of Spiritualism to orthodox religion.¹³ One of the books, *Spiritualism in the Old Testament*, was a recapitulation of articles written by the Rev. G. Maurice Elliott about the Bible's Spiritualist nature.¹⁴ The articles were published as a series titled "Spiritualism in the Bible" in the pages of *Psychic News* in 1937. Rev. Elliott was a Church of England vicar in London who resigned from his position in 1936 as a protest when the Bishop of London "refused permission for a medium to give a psychic demonstration under Elliott's auspices on church premises."¹⁵ Writing *Bible Blunders* and *The Psychic Life of Jesus*, Elliott proved that you could be a Christian and a committed Spiritualist.¹⁶ The vicar, a medium himself, claimed that as he had been in contact with spirits for many years, he could "*think* in terms in

¹² Stan A. Ballard, Maurice Barbanell, and Roger Green, *The Silver Birch Book of Questions & Answers: A Useful Pocket Reference for Enquirers and Psychic Study Groups* (London: Spiritual Truth Press, 1998), 46-47.

¹³ This number is estimated from an unpublished bibliography of Psychic Press, Limited, Psychic Book Club, and Spiritualist Press books compiled by Lynn Jarvis for the Survival Research Institute of Canada.

¹⁴ Rev. G. Maurice Elliott, *Spiritualism in the Old Testament* (London: Psychic Press, Ltd., 1938).

¹⁵ Maurice Barbanell, *Banned by the Church: The Secret Report on Spiritualism* (London: Spiritualist Press, Ltd., 1947), 3.

¹⁶ Rev. G. Maurice Elliott, *The Psychic Life of Jesus* (London: Psychic Book Club, 1938); Rev. G. Maurice Elliott, *Bible Blunders* (London: Psychic Press, Ltd., 1939).

which the average person cannot *yet* think.”¹⁷ Rev. Elliott was a force behind the Archbishop of Canterbury’s Committee on Spiritualism, discussed later in this chapter, believing that “The Bible is a continuous record of psychic manifestation” and that “None but students of psychic science can properly understand the Bible and interpret correctly the meaning of its stories, for the stories do but corroborate their own psychic experiences.”¹⁸

British Sentiment on Religion, Life After Death, and Spiritualism

In 1943, the Mass Observation project in the United Kingdom surveyed a London borough and discovered that forty-six percent of the respondents were doubtful or did not believe in life after death. One respondent commented, “I don’t think there’s a heaven or a future life for the spirit or anything like that. We all come back as other forms of life—a caterpillar or a worm or something, Or even a vegetable, meself, I think.”¹⁹ The file report also commented on the increase of movies, such as *Blithe Spirit* (1945), which featured a medium as a principal character, that touched on death, bereavement, or had endings “with characters looking forward to a better future.” According to the report, this showed that “such indirect evidence shows clearly enough that current rejection of Life after Death does not imply merely disinterest in future life. People are looking for proof since they have learnt to expect proof of any proposition before they can accept it.”²⁰ Of course, proof would be found in Spiritualist churches or with a private reading with a medium. Then, in 1944, the Mass Observation project surveyed residents in a London borough to ascertain their general views

¹⁷ Elliott, *Spiritualism in the Old Testament*, 8.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 28.

¹⁹ Mass Observation Archive: FR 1612 ‘Faith and Fear in Postwar Britain,’ February 1943, 13.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 18.

on religion. The file report noted that they “did not aim at going deeply into people’s inner feelings, for no man can measure another’s faith.” The results, they said, were confusing as “the ordinary person has not a logically arranged system of beliefs and doubts...His beliefs are a mixture of convictions and habits, independent thought and the relics of what he was taught as a child; his prejudices vary from the most trivial personal resentment to an all-embracing revolt.”²¹ The survey reported that a quarter of those who sometimes attended a Church of England service believed in the afterlife, but even one-fifth of those surveyed who did not participate in church services were believers. An unquantified number of survey respondents thought religion was “neither belief in a particular doctrine, nor going to church nor even a belief in God.”²² For these people, religion meant leading a good life, helping people as much as possible, and being nice and kind, which are characteristics close to the teachings of Spiritualism.

Spiritualism Today

Today’s practising Spiritualists share similar and different viewpoints on Spiritualism and religion. Rev. Karen Charles, senior pastor at the First Spiritualist Church of Galt, in Galt, Ontario, has seen changes in the forty years that she has been involved with Spiritualism. Today, people are more accepting of the religion, whereas in “the early days, many people who came into Spiritualism, they kept it quiet.” However, Rev. Charles kept her involvement in spiritualism quiet when she began her journey into the religion, which she said had been expected since the movement started. Rev. Charles said that as people visited

²¹ Mass Observation Archive: FR 2274 ‘Religious Attitudes in London Borough’, August 1945, 1.

²² Ibid., 4.

Lily Dale, the famous Spiritualist centre in New York State, they would not list their names “for fear that it would influence their professional jobs or their ability to earn an income.” Today is different as we live in a world “where the majority of people can be who they are.”²³ During her time with the First Spiritualist Church of Galt, Rev. Charles thought that the church should change its name to the First Spiritualist Society of Galt “so that we are not misleading people by the word ‘church,’ which in itself implies a Christian place and of following a Christian philosophy, which I think has done more harm than good in the world.”²⁴ After all, Spiritualism does not impose any beliefs on its members; it does not have a book, such as the Bible, that its members must follow, and as Rev. Charles said, people should “read everything you can and make up your own mind.”²⁵

Interestingly, Silver Birch, Maurice Barbanell’s spirit guide, said:

Real religion is service to the Great Spirit by serving His children. To do that, you require no churches, no priests, no clergymen, no sacred books—unless they implant in your heart the desire to serve, and make you love the children of the Great Spirit more than you loved them before. Serve wherever you can. Help to lift your brother’s load. That is religion.²⁶

Rev. Angie Morra, President of the Spiritualist Church of Canada, reiterated this aspect of Silver Birch’s teachings but expresses concern about how this is understood when she references it in her talks during Spiritualist services. “I don’t want people to think that it’s [Spiritualism] a free-for-all,” said Rev. Morra. The concern is when newcomers attend a

²³ Rev. Karen Charles, Interview with Rev. Karen Charles, interview by Nick Richbell, November 5, 2022.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Silver Birch, “Spirit Replies to the Archbishop. The Only Way to Get a Real Religious Revival,” *Psychic News*, January 9, 1937, 1.

service without the understanding that although Spiritualists have “certain guidelines that we teach, we follow, and we believe in...but nothing is concrete on our side the way that [orthodox] religion has the ten commandments, the Our Father, the Hail Mary, and all the different prayers that they use.”²⁷ For Al Batten, a fourth-generation Spiritualist, Spiritualism, “is simply a way of life. It’s a reasoned philosophy of life’s eternal progression, whereas religion is a manmade belief system.”²⁸ For Batten, this is “the difference between a religion and Spiritualism in its purest form. Because religion is manmade. Spiritualism is slightly different, its practices are manmade, but the reasoning behind it is something different.”²⁹

At War with the Church of England

The rise in popularity of Spiritualism in the United Kingdom during the First World War did not go unnoticed by the Anglican Church. Writing in *Searching for Raymond: Anglicanism, Spiritualism, and Bereavement between the Two World Wars*, Rene Kollar, historian and member of the Order of Saint Benedict, explained that with all the widespread death and destruction of the war, the Anglican Church did not provide guidance on how to “address the sorrow, grief, and anxiety occasioned by the staggering casualty lists of the war,” and this turned Anglicans towards Spiritualism where they were able to find “consolation and support.”³⁰ Kollar’s work explores in detail how the church started to ask

²⁷ Rev. Angie Morra, Interview with Rev. Angie Morra, interview by Nick Richbell, November 25, 2022.

²⁸ Al Batten, Interview with Al Batten, interview by Nick Richbell, April 27, 2023.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Rene Kollar, *Searching for Raymond: Anglicanism, Spiritualism, and Bereavement between the Two World Wars* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2000), 8.

the question of what its relationship was to Spiritualism at the 1920 Lambeth Conference under the leadership of archbishop Randall Davidson.³¹ *The Times* reported, “The conference promises to be of greater importance and more general interest than any of the five which have taken place since...Several of the subjects to be discussed are distinctly controversial.”³² Further, demonstrating that British newspapers were balanced in their reporting about Spiritualism and how they were highlighting the Country’s sentiment about Spiritualism in the 1920s, the *Daily Mail* (a newspaper that was anti-Spiritualist by the 1930s) stated: “Discussion of the arguments and facts which make for or against the recognition of spiritualistic phenomena could do nothing but good in clearing the mind and enabling it to frame a judgement on one of the greatest issues of to-day.”³³

However, the 1920 Lambeth Conference did not result in the Anglican Church making any official response to the relationship between the church and Spiritualism.³⁴ The committee appointed “to consider and report upon the Christian faith in relation to (a) Spiritualism; (b) Christian Science; and (c) Theosophy” was made up of 35 bishops and two archbishops from across the world.³⁵ In reporting their views on the subject matter, the Committee understood the attraction to these three movements in times of war as a “protest against materialism,” as well as an increase in scientific investigation and inquiry, and how

³¹ For a full explanation of the 1920 Lambeth Conference proceedings, see Kollar, 46-71.

³² “Bishops’ World Conference. Plans for Lambeth Meeting. Controversial Subjects,” *The Times*, June 25, 1920, 11.

³³ “The Lambeth Discussion,” *Daily Mail*, July 6, 1920, 6.

³⁴ Georgina Byrne, *Modern Spiritualism and the Church of England, 1850-1939*, Studies in Modern British Religious History, vol. 25 (Woodbridge, UK: Boydell Press, 2010), 177.

³⁵ *Conference of Bishops of the Anglican Communion, Holden at Lambeth Palace, July 5 to August 7, 1920* (London: Society for Promoting Christian knowledge, 1920), 116.

the church had failed in fully supporting their congregations, as their members were “left unsatisfied by the normal teaching and discipline offered to them.”³⁶ Ultimately, the 1920 Lambeth Conference produced four resolutions concerning Spiritualism, the principal outcome of which was that the church was “prepared to expect and welcome new light from psychical research.” However, the church felt “strongly that a larger place should be given in the teaching of the Church to the explanation of the true grounds of Christian belief in eternal life, and in immortality, and of the true content of belief in the Communion of Saints as involving real fellowship with the departed through the love of God in Jesus Christ.”³⁷

The Anglican Church took another fifteen years before they again focused on Spiritualism and its relationship to Christianity. Francis Underhill, the Dean of Rochester, had raised the issue of Spiritualism with the archbishop of Canterbury, Cosmo Gordon Lang, intending for Lang to form a commission to investigate the subject. Underhill (appointed Bishop of Bath and Wells in 1937) had such a keen interest in the subject that he wrote to Lang in June 1936 that he had been carrying on with his investigation of Spiritualism and had even sat with mediums. Underhill reminded the archbishop of a conversation earlier that year when Lang stated, “that if all that purports to come through from departed spirits were genuine, you [Lang] would prefer to become extinct rather than to go forward into the future life.” Underhill agreed with the archbishop, writing that he had received contact from his parents, as well as former Archbishop Davidson, yet “the general impression I gained is that, if these are the persons they purport to be, they have deteriorated mentally and spiritually

³⁶ Ibid., 117.

³⁷ *Conference of Bishops of the Anglican Communion, Holden at Lambeth Palace, July 5 to August 7, 1920*, 42.

since death.”³⁸ The Dean of Rochester ended his letter to the archbishop requesting that Lang task a few people to work with Underhill to continue the investigation into Spiritualism as he, the Dean, could not conduct further research alone.

Archbishop Lang was not in favour of establishing anything as formal as a commission, responding to Dean Underhill, in a confidential letter, that “it would be better for me, after consulting my brother Bishops, to take the responsibility of appointing a small body to carry on quiet investigations with you and coming to such conclusions as they are able to reach.” The archbishop’s views on the subject were made clear referring to it as a “painful and difficult matter.”³⁹ Archbishop Lang and Dean Underhill spent the remaining months of 1936 deciding who should be invited to join the committee, with Underhill agreeing to lead the committee as chairman. In November, Lang invited those people selected to join the committee. He acknowledged the work already undertaken by the Society for Psychical Research and that this committee “might undertake some independent investigation quietly and without undue publicity especially as to the bearing of these [Spiritualistic] phenomena on the Faith of the Christian people.”⁴⁰ The terms of reference for the Archbishop’s Committee on Spiritualism were simple, “To investigate the subject of communications with discarnate spirits and the claims of Spiritualism in relation to the Christian faith.”⁴¹

³⁸ Francis Underhill to Cosmo Gordon Lang, June 26, 1936. Lang papers, vol. 70. Lambeth Palace Library.

³⁹ Cosmo Gordon Lang to Francis Underhill, June 27, 1936. Lang papers, vol. 70. Lambeth Palace Library.

⁴⁰ Cosmo Gordon Lang draft letter, November 20, 1936. Lang Papers vol. 70. Lambeth Palace Library.

⁴¹ *Spiritualism: The 1939 Report to the Archbishop of Canterbury* (Mansfield, UK: The Churches’ Fellowship for Psychical and Spiritual Studies, 2021), 9.

The Archbishop's Committee had ten members: Francis Underhill (Chairman), the Very Rev. W.R. Matthews (Dean of St. Paul's), the Rev. Canon Harold Anson (Master of the Temple), the Rev. Professor L.W. Grensted, the Rev. Guy Mayfield, Dr. William Brown, Mrs. A.E.J. Rawlinson, Mr. P.E. Sandlands, Lady Gwendolyn Stephenson, and Mr. W.S. Wigglesworth (Secretary of the Committee). Miss Evelyn Underhill (Mrs. Stuart Moore), cousin to the Dean of Rochester, had initially accepted Archbishop Lang's invitation to sit on this committee as she was well known for her writing on mystics. However, Mrs. Moore believed that investigations into Spiritualism were of a scientific, not religious, nature and, therefore, should be left to organizations such as the Society for Psychical Research to conduct. In her letter of resignation from the Committee (included in the final report), Mrs. Moore wrote that her "attitude to the whole business is too radically critical to make my presence on the Committee of any effective use." Commenting on reading material shared amongst the committee members, her resignation letter continued, "I am struck once more with the utterly sub-Christian, anthropocentric, hopelessly unsupernatural character of the Spiritualist outlook. It is all about man, his survival, prospects, etc., hardly at all about God, and really represents *au fond* the nineteenth-century naturalistic attitude with a little superstition stirred in."⁴²

The Archbishop's Committee met twelve times over two years, from 1937 to 1938, and nine witnesses presented their knowledge of Spiritualism to the members of the Committee. The invited speakers included the editor of *Two Worlds*, Mr. Ernest Oaten,

⁴² Ibid., 10.

Baron Palmstierna, former Swedish Minister in London, and Dr. Nandor Fodor, noted psychical researcher.⁴³ The Committee even attended a séance organized by Palmstierna, himself a Spiritualist and an acquaintance of the medium, Adila Fachiri, a renowned Hungarian violinist. In 1937, Baron Palmstierna published a book, *Horizons of Immortality*, based on his sittings with Fachiri.⁴⁴ Though Archbishop Lang desired that the work of this committee be carried out “without undue publicity,” this was not, in reality, possible, as the work of the committee was soon discovered by the British press, both Spiritualist and broadsheet. In April 1937, Maurice Barbanell wrote that he had “more news of the Church Commission on Spiritualism.” The editor claimed that his informant, a cleric, had informed him of the church’s plan to take up to three years to gather evidence that life continues after death.⁴⁵ The informant was likely the Rev. G. Maurice Elliott, an Anglican cleric and committed Spiritualist, who resigned from his London post following orders from the Bishop of London that he could not bring mediums and Spiritualism into his church.⁴⁶ Complaints about Rev. Elliott were received by the Archbishop of Canterbury’s office in 1935 when the Bishop of Guildford asked Lang whether he was aware that Elliott was “going into the dioceses around London speaking about Spiritualism” without any official invitation to do so

⁴³ The remaining witnesses were Miss. Mercy Phillimore (Secretary of the London Spiritualist Alliance), Dame Edith Lyttleton, Kenneth Richmond (SPR member), the Hon. Mr. Justice Atkinson (founding President of the Churches’ Fellowship for Psychical Study in 1953), Dr. William Brown (psychologist, member of the Committee, and SPR member), and Dr. Oliver Gatty (lecturer at Balliol College, Oxford, and psychical researcher).

⁴⁴ Erik Kule Palmstierna, *Horizons of Immortality: A Quest for Reality* (London: Constable, 1937).

⁴⁵ Maurice Barbanell, “The Church Wakes Up,” *Psychic News*, April 17, 1937, 6.

⁴⁶ “‘I Have Received a Call From God,’ Declares Maurice Elliott,” *Psychic News*, January 30, 1937, 4.

by the local clergy.⁴⁷ The response confirmed that Archbishop Lang was aware of Elliott's spiritualistic activities and felt "sure that it is dangerous to experiment with spiritualistic séances." The letter ended with the view that "If Spiritualism has anything in it the matter ought to be investigated by skilled and trained scientific enquirers and certainly not by the ordinary clergy."⁴⁸ This is an interesting statement considering the formation and membership of the Archbishop's Committee on Spiritualism just one year later.

Despite the Committee on Spiritualism's aim to be private, *Psychic News* was aware of Ernest Oaten's meeting with the Committee. The publication reported in December 1937 that he gave a "magnificent address...with great fearlessness and courage, Oaten told the Church representatives a few home truths."⁴⁹ Although the press was aware of the Committee, it was still shrouded in mystery when this article was published in *Psychic News*. However, that soon changed, as on January 23, 1938, the *Sunday Dispatch* published an article on its front page with the headline, "The Church is Holding a Secret Inquiry into Spiritualism. 'Plain Clothes' Clergy Visit Séances." In an interview with the newspaper, Oaten said, "I spoke to the members and came away with the impression that the committee was more concerned with discovering the effect of spiritualism on the Church than with ascertaining whether it was true or not." The newspaper also interviewed Rev. Maurice Elliott and Mrs. M.A. St. Clair Stobart, both involved in the Confraternity of Clergy and

⁴⁷ The Bishop of Guildford to The Archbishop of Canterbury, November 27, 1935. Lang papers, vol. 133. Lambeth Palace Library.

⁴⁸ The Archbishop of Canterbury to The Bishop of Guildford, December 4, 1935. Lang vol. 133. Lambeth Palace Library.

⁴⁹ "Oaten Eloquentlly Puts Our Case to Church Committee on Spiritualism," *Psychic News*, December 25, 1937, 7.

Spiritualists movement, with Stobart quoted as saying, “There are many clergymen – at least two hundred are known to us – who are sympathetic, but who are too afraid of their future to be actively associated with us.”⁵⁰

The church was not impressed. Mr. Wigglesworth, Secretary to the Committee on Spiritualism, wrote to Francis Underhill that Oaten’s “impressions of his visit to the Committee are most offensive as is his inuendo that we prefer expediency to truth.”⁵¹ Wigglesworth was upset that Oaten had “blabbed” to the press, including *Psychic News*, which picked up on the *Sunday Dispatch* article on January 29, 1938. Despite a request from a Committee member to publish a response to the article in the *Church Times*, Wigglesworth thought that “we ought to be consistent with the attitude we have hitherto adopted, namely that our proceedings are private and that the less said about them in the newspapers, the better.”⁵² The secrecy behind the work on the committee would continue to be a problem for the church. As Secretary of the University of London’s Council on Psychical Investigation, Harry Price wanted information about the Committee’s work. Francis Underhill’s response to Walter Wigglesworth supported the desire to remain “bound by the Archbishop’s ruling” (that is, that the work be private) and revealed that he was “already receiving many tiresome letters” about the outcome of the Committee’s investigations. Underhill even called Ernest

⁵⁰ “The Church is Holding a Secret Inquiry into Spiritualism. ‘Plain Clothes’ Clergy Visit Séances,” *Sunday Dispatch*, January 23, 1938, 1.

⁵¹ Mr. Wigglesworth to Francis Underhill, January 25, 1938. Lang papers, Archbishop’s Committee on Spiritualism, Lambeth Palace Library.

⁵² Ibid.

Oaten a “dreadful fellow” and believed that any correspondence with him “would do more harm than good, as he would be pretty sure to use it in some wrong way.”⁵³

The Archbishop’s Committee on Spiritualism met for the twelfth and last time on June 3, 1938. By November 1938, the report had been written and split into two reports: the majority report was signed by seven committee members; the remaining three signed a minority report. The original plan of the committee was that the report would be shared at the bishops’ meeting in January 1939; however, as Francis Underhill was indisposed for some months owing to ill health, the Archbishop of Canterbury decided to delay sharing the report until the June bishops’ meeting. This series of unfortunate events only contributed to shared confusion among members of the church and the press about when the committee’s report would be published. The archbishop’s chaplain wrote to Francis Underhill as early as February 1938, informing him that Lang:

wonders whether it would not suffice if you in collaboration with the Dean of St. Paul’s, were to write a letter for publication in the *Psychic News* or otherwise, pointing out that the Report of the Committee over which you preside has not yet been issued, and advising people not to jump to conclusions beforehand which may prove to be unwarranted.⁵⁴

The confusion over whether the report would be published continued throughout 1938. The archbishop’s chaplain informed the Rev. Canon Bird in December that the report would

⁵³ Francis Underhill to Walter Wigglesworth, January 26, 1938, Lang papers, Archbishop’s Committee on Spiritualism, Lambeth Palace Library. The private papers of Francis Underhill were never archived in Lambeth Palace Library, and it is unknown what happened to them.

⁵⁴ Archbishop Lang’s Chaplain to Francis Underhill, February 28, 1938. Lang papers vol. 70. Lambeth Palace Library.

likely be published in early 1939. The letter also refuted the claim that the archbishop had not released the report because he planned to “shelve it.”⁵⁵

Maurice Barbanell, writing to the Bishop Underhill in November 1938, inquired, “When the findings of the Archbishop’s Commission on Spiritualism...will be published?” He was informed by the bishop’s chaplain that “the Bishop does not know when the findings will be published.”⁵⁶ Underhill’s chaplain, Canon Alcock, wrote to Walter Wigglesworth, sharing a copy of Barbanell’s inquiry and the response sent to him, even stating, “I think the Bishop told me the writer was a _____ nuisance! You can supply a fitting word!”⁵⁷ Ultimately, the Archbishop of Canterbury wrote to Bishop Underhill in July 1939, informing him that “the Diocesan Bishops of England and Wales whom I consulted advised that your Report should not be published.” There was a concern amongst the bishops that the report would encourage people “to put trust in the admittedly doubtful character of alleged communications from discarnate spirits.”⁵⁸ Bishop Underhill’s response to the Primate confirmed that members of the Committee on Spiritualism who signed the Majority Report never intended for it to be published, “and they will no doubt be relieved by the decision of

⁵⁵ Archbishop Lang’s Chaplain to the Rev. Canon Bird, December 16, 1938, Lang papers vol. 70, Lambeth Palace Library.

⁵⁶ Maurice Barbanell to the Bishop of Bath and Wells, November 10, 1938. Lang papers, Archbishop’s Committee on Spiritualism, Lambeth Palace Library. The Chaplain’s response to Barbanell is copied at the bottom of the original letter.

⁵⁷ Canon Alcock to Walter Wigglesworth, November 11, 1938. Lang papers, Archbishop’s Committee on Spiritualism, Lambeth Palace Library.

⁵⁸ Archbishop of Canterbury to the Bishop of Bath and Wells, July 26, 1939. Lang papers, vol. 70. Lambeth Palace Library.

the Bishops.”⁵⁹ Indeed, it would now be evident just how much of a nuisance Maurice Barbanell would become over the refusal to publish the report.

Maurice Barbanell, the ardent and vocal supporter of Spiritualism, firmly believed that the Archbishop of Canterbury had suppressed the Committee on Spiritualism’s Report because it was favourable to the movement. He reasoned that had the report been negative about Spiritualism, the church would not have hesitated in publishing it. *Psychic News* began publishing letters from the public, such as one that insisted, “If the investigation were thorough, it must have disclosed that Spiritualism is grounded on facts far more reliable than the creeds of Christianity.”⁶⁰ Within a month, *Psychic News* reported on other newspapers’ commentary about the report being withheld from the public. Francis Underhill, Bishop of Bath and Wells and Chairman of the Committee on Spiritualism, was quoted in an interview to the *Daily Sketch* as having said, “We investigated the whole phenomena of Spiritualism. However, there was a considerable divergence of views among the committee. Given this, it was not thought wise to publish a report at the present time.”⁶¹ To confuse matters, the archbishop informed other interested parties that the report would not be published as the subject matter required further investigation. These statements gave conflicting reasons for the decision not to publish the report, in which there was great interest.

These newspaper articles were just the beginning. On February 24, 1940, the *Psychic News* front page headline read: “Spiritualism Is Proved by The Church. Primate’s Secret

⁵⁹ Bishop of Bath and Wells to the Archbishop of Canterbury, July 28, 1939. Lang papers, vol. 70. Lambeth Palace Library.

⁶⁰ “Clerical Dilemma?” *Psychic News*, December 30, 1939, 7.

⁶¹ “Primate’s Ban on Spiritualist Report Is News,” *Psychic News*, January 20, 1940, 5.

Committee Votes 9 To 3 In Favour!” In that article, Barbanell wrote that the members who believed Spiritualism to be true were “influential,” whereas those who did not sign the majority report were “unimportant and unknown.” How did Maurice Barbanell have these facts from an unpublished report? The answer is that the report had been leaked, with the editor writing, “Our authority for this statement is someone who has seen the committee’s secret report. The statement is confirmed by a member of the committee itself. Both are famous. Both bear unblemished reputations.”⁶² The following day, the *Sunday Dispatch* and the *Sunday Pictorial* reported on Barbanell’s lead article in *Psychic News*. The *Sunday Dispatch* published, citing Lambeth Palace, that “The Statement in the *Psychic News* is both unauthorized and inaccurate.” The *Sunday Pictorial* declared that it was starting its own investigation into Spiritualism following the secrecy surrounding the church’s report.⁶³ Notably, this story did not receive front-page news from the regular press. Instead, they ran the story buried deeper within their newspaper, with war stories making the prominent headlines.

Of course, the press paid attention to the report on Spiritualism, no matter the placement in the newspapers, which the church had noticed, and they were clear about where the leak came from. Following the publication of the articles discussed, Bishop Underhill wrote to Archbishop Lang, stating, “There is now, I think, no doubt that the information appearing in the Press about the report on Spiritualism comes from Baron Erik Palmstierna.”

⁶² The Editor, “Spiritualism Is Proved by The Church. Primate’s Secret Committee Votes 9 To 3 In Favour!” *Psychic News*, February 24, 1940, 1.

⁶³ “A Church Report Mystery. Spiritualists Challenge Archbishop,” *Sunday Dispatch*, February 25, 1940, 16, and “Spiritualism: Our Great Inquiry. Do the War Dead Come Back?” *Sunday Pictorial*, February 25, 1940, 7.

Underhill further stated that this revelation comes from an interview Hannen Swaffer gave, noting he had seen the report after meeting a “distinguished European statesman.”⁶⁴

Palmstierna, the former Swedish Minister in London, known as a Spiritualist and Committee witness, had not received a copy of the report for having attended one meeting. Instead, Palmstierna had requested permission to read a copy of the report in the hands of one of the committee members. When Archbishop Lang asked for Underhill’s permission for the Baron to have access to the report, Underhill replied, “I am quite ready to let Baron Palmstierna to see the report on Spiritualism. I find him singularly credulous about the phenomena of Spiritualism, but no doubt he is enough of a diplomat to keep secrets.”⁶⁵ Amongst all this drama, and without Palmstierna’s side of the story, it is difficult to determine whether the Bishop was a poor judge of character, the Baron was not a reliable diplomat, or both. Considering that parts of the report were now being published through unauthorized sources, Underhill wrote to Lang, “Your Grace may not agree with me, but I really think more harm is being done by letting the main points leak out bit by bit than by publishing it in full.”⁶⁶

Maurice Barbanell continued to publish articles about the church’s refusal to publish the report on Spiritualism in the early months of 1940.⁶⁷ He also shared the sentiment of the readers of *Psychic News*. In April 1940, a reader from Scotland wrote,

⁶⁴ Bishop of Bath and Wells to the Archbishop of Canterbury, March 11, 1940, Lang papers, vol. 70, Lambeth Palace Library.

⁶⁵ Bishop of Bath and Wells to the Archbishop of Canterbury, October 12, 1939. Lang papers, vol. 70. Lambeth Palace Library.

⁶⁶ Bishop of Bath and Wells to the Archbishop of Canterbury, March 11, 1940, Lang papers, vol. 70, Lambeth Palace Library.

⁶⁷ See: “New Inquiry By ‘Sunday Pictorial,’” *Psychic News*, March 2, 1940, 3; “Spiritualism’s Great Triumph. Primate’s Committee Press for Publication of Their Report,” *Psychic News*, March 9, 1940, 1, and “Primate

In past ages the Church has never taken the initiative in any branch of new thought...Divergence from established practice is remarkably alien to the Church, and acceptance of new thought is only acknowledged by it when non-acceptance would bring about an untenable position of ridicule. The Church will not help Spiritualism, even on the doubtful assumption of the report. Leave the Church alone, it is dying. Better to have a free Spiritualist movement than one hampered by creed and dogma.⁶⁸

Spiritualism and the report were discussed at the bishops' meetings on June 18, and June 29, 1940. Archbishop Lang asked the bishops to decide whether the report should be published, and the decision was taken in favour of not publishing the report. The *Times* published the official statement on the non-publication of the report, writing, "It is stated that in respect of practical guidance to Christian people, the report does not seem to be so clear or conclusive as to make its publication desirable."⁶⁹ Maurice Barbanell quoted the church as saying, "The report contains valuable information about the various phenomena with which Spiritualism is concerned," leading him to ask, "Why, then, does the Church withhold this 'valuable information' from the world?"⁷⁰

By this time, Barbanell and *Psychic News* had seen the report, or they had been provided with the direct quotes from it that were being published in the paper. Printing what they considered the report's main conclusions, *Psychic News* also made references to the Minority Report that, until then, had mostly been ignored by Barbanell. He would not have

Tells Fleet Street to Print the News! Swaffer Askes: 'Why Not Publish the Report?'" *Psychic News*, March 16, 1940, 3.

⁶⁸ T.W. Johnston to the Editor, "No Help from Church," April 27, 1940, *Psychic News*, 7.

⁶⁹ "Ecclesiastical News. Report on Spiritualism," *Times*, July 5, 1940, 7.

⁷⁰ "Bishops Smother Church Report on Spiritualism," July 13, 1940, *Psychic News*, 1. There is no reference in Lambeth Palace Library to the statement that Maurice Barbanell claims the church made.

agreed with the three signatories of the minority report because they did not support Spiritualism. However, he commented that they “reserved their opinions, declaring that some future discovery may be made which might explain away Spiritualism.”⁷¹ An article in the Spiritualist journal *Light*, written by one of the witnesses invited to testify to the Archbishop’s Committee on Spiritualism, stated, “The Church itself is a greater loser than the general public, for the march of knowledge cannot be stemmed.”⁷²

The Press and Publications Board of the Church Assembly, writing to the Primate’s chaplain, sent a copy of *Psychic News* so that the archbishop could see their comments on the announcement from Lambeth Palace. Robert Stokes, Secretary of the Board, commented about *Psychic News*, “Their circulation is, of course, limited, and happily, I have not yet seen much sign of serious interest in the daily Press. I think ‘Psychic News’ can be ignored – at any rate until the daily Press take notice of them.”⁷³ The response received from the chaplain stated that “The Archbishop’s Press cuttings have included a number of articles from the spiritualist press including the ‘Psychic News,’ but these can be ignored as being ex-party statements.”⁷⁴ The archbishop’s office held little concern about what was being published about them or the announcement that Lambeth Palace released. Stokes, however, was correct. There was little coverage in the regular press about the church’s announcement. What differed from Barbanell’s article in *Psychic News* is that the *Guardian* published more from

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Mercy Phillimore, “Church and Spiritualism. Bishops’ Decision Against Publication of Committee’s Report,” *Light*, July 11, 1940, 1.

⁷³ Robert Stokes to the Rev. Dr. A.C. Don, July 19, 1940. Lang papers, vol. 70. Lambeth Palace Library.

⁷⁴ Rev. A.C. Don to Robert Stokes, July 22, 1940, Lang papers, vol. 70. Lambeth Palace Library.

that announcement. They continued from where Barbanell left off, “But in respect of practical guidance to Christian people on a subject fraught with grave dangers, it did not seem to be so clear or conclusive as to make its publication desirable.”⁷⁵ Was Maurice Barbanell being fair to the church by not publishing their full announcement, or was he continuing his propaganda campaign against them by withholding information from his readers, as the church withheld the report from the public? Whatever the case, all concerned had arrived at an impasse. No matter how loud Maurice Barbanell shouted, the church would not release the report on Spiritualism.

Dr. Cosmo Gordon Lang’s fourteen years at Lambeth Palace were not straightforward, rather “marked by ecclesiastical, national, and international crises.”⁷⁶ He stewarded the revision of the Prayer Book through the Church and Parliament, and the British government consulted him about the future of Edward VIII, which led to the King’s abdication and the subsequent coronation of George VI. Furthermore, and likely most difficult for Lang was leading the church through the challenging years of World War II. All the while, Lang was fully aware that the church was losing members as they drifted away, but he “believed that the main priority of the Church of England was to maintain its ministry and the spiritual life of its people.”⁷⁷ This would have contributed to his ideas about

⁷⁵ “Anglican Inquiry on Spiritualism,” *Guardian*, July 4, 1940, 10.

⁷⁶ Robert Beaken, *Cosmo Lang: Archbishop in War and Crisis* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2012), 3.

⁷⁷ Beaken, 4.

Spiritualism and the church. Following a life of service to the church, Lang resigned his position as Archbishop of Canterbury at the age of 77 , effective March 31, 1942.⁷⁸

On learning of the archbishop's resignation, Barbanell seized this opportunity to criticize the church's handling of the report again in *Psychic News's* pages. The editor also publicly accused Archbishop Lang of being at the heart of why the church was failing and that he "smothered an epoch-making report" that could have changed the direction of the church for the better.⁷⁹ In 1942, around the time of the archbishop's resignation, Maurice Barbanell published a booklet, *The Silence of Dr. Lang*, mostly comprised of previously shared attacks and criticisms of the whole affair dealing with the report on Spiritualism.⁸⁰ Once again, Barbanell claimed that if the church's report had been unfavourable to Spiritualism, it would not have been suppressed by Lambeth Palace or Lang. Maurice Barbanell ended the booklet:

"GUESS WHO!
'Religion attracts, but the churches repel.'
Who said that?
The Archbishop of Canterbury, believe it or not!
Who is in control of the Church?
The Archbishop of Canterbury.'" ⁸¹

The controversy surrounding the church's report on Spiritualism did not stop with Lang's resignation, but it did appear to slow down. Of course, it is unsurprising that Maurice

⁷⁸ Lang's biographers detail his poor health stemming from a blood clot to the heart in 1928 that led to a "debilitating illness" experienced in the 1930s (Beaken, 144.) Cosmo Lang collapsed in the street and died on December 5, 1945. The autopsy revealed Lang suffered a fatal heart attack.

⁷⁹ "Primate Who Hastened Church's Decay. He Smothered Epoch-Making Report on Spiritualism," *Psychic News*, January 31, 1942, 5.

⁸⁰ Maurice Barbanell, *The Silence of Dr. Lang* (London: Psychic Press, Ltd., 1942).

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 18.

Barbanell would focus some of his attention on the new Archbishop of Canterbury, Dr. William Temple. However, Barbanell's rhetoric was seemingly dampened by this time.⁸² Archbishop Temple's papers show that there was still some interest from the clergy who wrote to inquire about the Committee of Spiritualism's Report. Lambeth Palace maintained its position "that it was never intended to publish any report of the findings of the Committee" since the Committee was not in complete agreement about the outcome.⁸³ William Temple's time as Archbishop of Canterbury was short; he died suddenly on October 26, 1944. Geoffrey Fisher, the Bishop of London, succeeded Temple at Lambeth Palace as leader of the Church of England. He inherited the report on Spiritualism controversy when *Psychic News* published the majority report in 1947.

On November 8, 1947, A.W. Austen, now the editor of *Psychic News* following Maurice Barbanell's departure from the newspaper the previous year, ran a lead article where he printed the conclusions of the majority report. Austen wrote that he considered "it my duty to publish this report, in defiance of the Bishops who banned it – not so much to satisfy the natural curiosity of Spiritualists, but to give Anglican parsons and laymen the lead that was denied them by their own leaders."⁸⁴ The report's publication made headline news in the regular press. Both the *Sunday Dispatch* and the *Sunday Pictorial* reported on Austen's

⁸² "Dr. Temple Still Keeps It Dark," *Psychic News*, April 18, 1942, 1.

⁸³ Archbishop of Canterbury's Chaplain to Canon Parsons, September 30, 1943. Temple papers, vol. 42, Lambeth Palace Library.

⁸⁴ A.W. Austen, "Archbishop's Report. The Bishops Kept It Secret For 9 Years! We disclose findings of the Committee on Spiritualism. Exclusive to 'Psychic News'," *Psychic News*, November 8, 1947, 1.

release of the private report.⁸⁵ Hannen Swaffer, writing in *The People*, asked, “What, now, will the Church of England do about the report? As it has finally been printed, it can no longer be ignored.”⁸⁶ Austen sent a copy of the revelatory edition of *Psychic News* to Archbishop Fisher, writing that the “Report came to me quite unsought and not from any of the signatories.” He urged Fisher to now publish the whole report and confirm if, as Bishop Underhill had stated many times, the church intended to continue their investigation into Spiritualism.⁸⁷ In the same year, Maurice Barbanell published *Banned By The Church: The Secret Report on Spiritualism*. Not significantly different from *The Silence of Dr. Lang*, Barbanell’s booklet was a repetition of what he had previously published in *Psychic News*: criticisms of the Church and the Primate, along with Ernest Oaten’s witness statement that was given before the Committee on Spiritualism (and published as a stand-alone pamphlet and in the pages of the Spiritualist press before). Barbanell ended his booklet:

So, it was not surprising to find in the twentieth century the Church withholding its report on Spiritualism. But suppression is a boomerang. Truth cannot be suppressed for long. Knowledge does spread and permeate. Dr. Lang did a great service for Spiritualism when he banned the report.⁸⁸

Austen, like Barbanell before him, was unsuccessful in pressuring the church to publish the full report. The archbishop’s response to Austen’s letter was sent by his chaplain, who made no comment about or reference to the publication of the report and thanked him

⁸⁵ “Spiritualism Secret. ‘Bishops Banned Report, My Duty to Publish,” *Sunday Dispatch*, November 9, 1947, 5; “Church’s Secret Report Revealed after 9 Years,” *Sunday Pictorial*, November 9, 1947, 1.

⁸⁶ Hannen Swaffer, “Spiritualism: Church’s Secret Leaks Out,” *People*, November 9, 1947, 5.

⁸⁷ A.W. Austen to Archbishop Fisher, November 7, 1947. Fisher papers, vol. 36. Lambeth Palace Library.

⁸⁸ Barbanell, *Banned by the Church: The Secret Report on Spiritualism*, 42.

for his letter.⁸⁹ Austen sent *Psychic News* reporters to interview the members of the Committee of Spiritualism, with varying degrees of success. While Canon Grensted believed that the report's publication would “end rumours and guesses” about the investigation’s findings, he also noted that people should remember that there was a minority report. Dr. William Brown, Harley Street psychologist, provided the following written statement to *Psychic News*: “I disapprove of the publication of the report in the face of Archbishop Temple’s decision that it should not be published, but, of course, I would have been in favour of its publication, apart from this qualification, since I was one of its signatories.”⁹⁰

Brown’s comments appear to be innocuous. However, they are essential when considering how Maurice Barbanell revealed his “Greatest Scoop” in 1952. After the death of Dr. Brown, Barbanell wrote in *Two Worlds* how he learned that Dr. Brown was a member of the Committee from Baron Palmstierna, without mentioning the Swedish minister by name, and then visited the psychologist in his London consulting room. Dr. Brown informed Barbanell that he would not have participated in the church’s investigation had he known the report would never be published. A man of his word, Dr. Brown, would not allow Maurice Barbanell to take a copy of the confidential report that was in his possession. According to Barbanell, what transpired was that Dr. Brown took a copy of the report from his desk and handed it to the editor, allowing him to read it while in his office. Barbanell wrote that he was “blessed with a retentive memory.” After reading the report, he returned immediately to

⁸⁹ Chaplain to the Archbishop of Canterbury to A.W. Austen, November 8, 1947. Fisher papers, vol. 36. Lambeth Palace Library.

⁹⁰ A.W. Austen, “We Approach Archbishop. Will He Now Publish the Whole Report?” *Psychic News*, November 15, 1947, 1.

the *Two Worlds* office and “dictated from memory all that I could remember of the majority report.”⁹¹ As Austen had done for *Psychic News* in 1947, Barbanell arranged for the report’s signatories to be interviewed, saying, “Some were co-operative, and some were not.”⁹²

Comparing Austen's and Barbanell’s accounts leads one to question which man actually broke the story. Roy Stemman, Barbanell’s assistant editor, agreed that there was doubt about who received the “scoop”; he wondered whether the story had been leaked to both *Psychic News* and *Two Worlds*. Stemman was unaware that Barbanell had a photographic memory.⁹³ It is worthwhile noting that A.W. Austen, his wife, and his mother-in-law left England for Western Australia in 1953. Apparently, the family departed owing to Mrs. Austen’s poor health and the need for her to be in a warmer climate.⁹⁴ Was there perhaps also fallout between Austen and Barbanell over publication of the church report that may have contributed to the Austen family’s emigration to Australia?

The church’s report on Spiritualism remained closed until March 1, 1979, when Archbishop Donald Coggan permitted The Churches’ Fellowship for Psychical and Spiritual Studies (CFPSS) to publish the report.⁹⁵ Coggan’s papers include letters between his office, the Venerable Michael Perry (editor of the *Christian Parapsychologist*), and the Lambeth

⁹¹ Maurice Barbanell, “My Greatest Scoop,” *Two Worlds*, June 7, 1952, 1.

⁹² Ibid.

⁹³ Roy Stemman, Interview with Roy Stemman., interview by Nick Richbell, October 27, 2022.

⁹⁴ Lis Warwood and Walter Meyer zu Erpen, “The Search for A.W. Austen.” Unpublished manuscript, January 19, 2018. PDF file.

⁹⁵ The CFPSS was founded after World War II, in 1953, to “give a reasoned Christian response,” to people, namely Spiritualists, who were looking for answers to questions to which the church could not respond. “About CFPSS,” Churches Fellowship for Psychical and Spiritual Studies, June 20, 2023, <https://www.churchesfellowship.co.uk/about-us>.

Palace Librarian.⁹⁶ The correspondence primarily dealt with when to publish the report, considering that the Church operated on the rule that church records would be closed for forty years. Rev. Perry saw no issue releasing the report a few months before the closure period ended, writing to the archbishop's office: "How widely is the 40-year rule known? Not very extensively I would guess; but if *Psychic News* gets wind of it (and that is likely) they will certainly apply to Lambeth early in 1979 for facilities. They refer to the 'suppressed' report almost weekly."⁹⁷ Offering to publish the complete report and provide commentary on it, Rev. Perry cautioned the archbishop "to be prepared for requests from *Psychic News* which will be hard to resist without adverse publicity. The thing is forty years old; let's disinter it as decently as we can."⁹⁸

On March 1, 1979, the Church Information Office's press release informed the world, "After forty years in wraps, a report on Christians and Spiritualism is unveiled today (Thursday, March 1). The dust has at last been disturbed – Lambeth Palace archives opened that is – to allow publication of findings that have been the centre of speculation for decades."⁹⁹ The press release gave the reason that the Committee was deeply divided in opinion, and Archbishop Lang chose not to release the report before falling under the forty-year embargo according to the church rules on releasing official papers. In his commentary that was published along with the report, the Rev. Chancellor Garth Moore, President of the

⁹⁶ Coggan papers, vol. 74. Lambeth Palace Library.

⁹⁷ Rev. Michael Perry to Prebendary D.W. Cleverly Ford, February 7, 1978. Coggan papers, vol. 74. Lambeth Palace Library.

⁹⁸ Ibid.

⁹⁹ Church Information Office, "Spiritual Unveiling – 40 Years On," March 1, 1979. Coggan papers, vol. 74. Lambeth Palace Library.

CFPSS, noted the distinct lack of theology in the report and that the report's conclusion that it is "important that the representatives of the Church should keep in touch with groups of intelligent persons who believe in Spiritualism," should be changed to "it is important that Christians should keep abreast of psychical research."

Maurice Barbanell remained unhappy, even with the official release of the church report. Ten days after the report was published, *Psychic News* ran a three-page spread pronouncing that the "Church is 40 years late in releasing a suppressed report on Spiritualism. PN is vindicated at last," a headline which demonstrated that Barbanell still held a grudge against the church.¹⁰⁰ However, he had nothing new to add to his previous, many, criticisms of the church's handling of the report. This time, Barbanell challenged Chancellor Moore's commentary and, ever the businessman, promoted sale in the Psychic News Bookshop of the pamphlet that gave the full text of the report. More interesting is that Maurice Barbanell quoted the discarnate Archbishop Lang, channelled at a séance with the direct-voice medium Leslie Flint, "If only I could have my life over again, with the knowledge I have now, how differently I would act. I could have done so much."¹⁰¹ Lang was again channelled by Flint in 1959 when the discarnate archbishop said that during his physical life he was afraid of the dangers of Spiritualism, but now, "I do feel very strongly that it [Spiritualism] is a thing that is so vital and so important, that all peoples should be

¹⁰⁰ Maurice Barbanell, "Church is 40 Years Late in Releasing Suppressed Report on Spiritualism. PN is Vindicated at Last," *Psychic News*, March 10, 1979, 1.

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

conscious and know of it.”¹⁰² Indeed, if Lang had softened his views on Spiritualism during his lifetime, the report would have been released and saved the church from the publicity the archbishop was so eager to avoid.

The Catholic Church, Maurice Barbanell, and Spiritualism

In 1945, as he waged his battle against the Church of England, Maurice Barbanell found the time and energy to go up against the Catholic Church. This time, however, Barbanell was not imploring the church to release a report, rather commenting on a book censored by the Archbishop of Liverpool, the Most Reverend Richard Downey. Published in 1944 and authored by the Rev. H.V. O’Neill, *Spiritualism as Spiritualists Have Written Of It* was, according to the Archbishop of Liverpool, “particularly welcome at the present time which is witnessing a recrudescence of Spiritualism owing to...the less laudable desire of unscrupulous charlatans to make capital out of the mourners’ longing and credulity.”¹⁰³ Downey also commented in his preface to O’Neill’s book that, “The evil effects, both physical and moral, of Spiritualism are admitted on all hands, and have been pointed out by psychologists and even by investigators who regard Spiritualism as a gigantic system of fraud.”¹⁰⁴ Concerning Spiritualism, O’Neill’s purpose in writing the book was to show Catholics “how hollow, how fraudulent, how contradictory a movement it is,” and he wanted to deter people, “from having anything to do with it.”¹⁰⁵

¹⁰² Archbishop Cosmo Gordon Lang Speaking Through Leslie Flint, “Cosmo Lang Communicates,” 1959, The Leslie Flint Trust, <https://www.leslieflint.com/cosmo-lang-may-1959>. Accessed June 20, 2023.

¹⁰³ Herbert V. O’Neill, *Spiritualism as Spiritualists Have Written of It* (London: Burns Oats & Washbourne Ltd., 1944), 14.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., 13.

¹⁰⁵ O’Neill, *Spiritualism as Spiritualists Have Written of It*, 15.

What provoked a Catholic priest who had spent more than thirty years studying Spiritualism to publish such a vehement condemnation of Spiritualism? Seemingly, the answer was a column that Maurice Barbanell published in *Psychic News* in 1943 with the headline, “A Warning to All Mediums.”¹⁰⁶ Barbanell was advising mediums to be cautious in their delivery of messages from the spirit world about the deaths of members of the armed forces fighting in World War II. “Years of orthodox teaching” were the reason why so many recently-deceased soldiers did not realize they had died, which in turn caused mediums to give inaccurate messages to family members who were looking for answers. Often, when death comes unexpectedly, or without warning, the deceased continue to believe that they were still carrying out whatever task they were doing at the time of death, like flying an airplane. Furthermore, the extreme anguish felt by living relatives of those at war to find answers, according to Barbanell, can “impair, clog, and distort the psychic faculties of all mediums.” Barbanell was asking mediums not to raise the hopes of the living and, “In times of difficulty, when nearly all the odds are against successful spirit communication, it is best to be cautious.”¹⁰⁷ Rev. O’Neill interpreted these words to mean that mediums are liars. The messages they deliver are their own “concoction”; Maurice Barbanell would not need to issue a warning to mediums “if they were genuinely receiving those deceiving messages.”¹⁰⁸

Never shying away from controversy or the opportunity to defend Spiritualism, Maurice Barbanell published his review of O’Neill’s book in *Psychic News* over eighteen

¹⁰⁶ Maurice Barbanell, “A Warning to All Mediums,” *Psychic News*, November 27, 1943, 4.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid.

¹⁰⁸ O’Neill, *Spiritualism as Spiritualists Have Written of It*, 17.

weeks. With his characteristic sense of humour, Barbanell opened his review, “Were it not for the fact that Survival is proved, I would begin my review of a book, written by a Roman Catholic priest, by saying, ‘This will make you die of laughter.’”¹⁰⁹ This set the tone for Maurice Barbanell’s review of O’Neill’s “attack on Spiritualism.” Ending this first article, the editor encouraged readers to purchase the book if they could not wait for his further reviews in the coming weeks, telling them the book was “worth much more than its price.”¹¹⁰ Maurice Barbanell addressed O’Neill’s analysis of the article “A Warning to All Mediums,” stating that he did not regret anything and that “it was a straightforward effort to deal with a psychic problem.”¹¹¹ The problem is that the ongoing conditions of war made it difficult for some mediums to communicate effectively with those in the spirit world.

Rev. H.V. O’Neill also asked, “Is Spiritualism a Religion?” One of the priest’s objections was the claim by Spiritualists that there was no creed or dogma in their religion. O’Neill wrote that there can be no religion without creed or dogma. As Spiritualism proclaimed, life continues after physical death, spirit communication can occur, and dogma exists. There was also a creed, according to O’Neill, as Spiritualists followed the Seven Principles of Spiritualism: 1) The Fatherhood of God; 2) The brotherhood of Man; 3) The Communion of Spirits and the Ministry of Angels; 4) The Continuous Existence of the Human Soul; 5) Personal Responsibility; 6) Compensation and Retribution Hereafter for all the Good and Evil Deeds done on Earth; and 7) Eternal Progress Open to every Human

¹⁰⁹ Maurice Barbanell, “Keep the Rome Fires Burning! ‘Spiritualism is Riddled with Fraud and Is Dangerous,’ Says This Priest,” *Psychic News*, June 16, 1945, 1.

¹¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹¹ Maurice Barbanell, “This Priest Says Mediums Are Liars and Know It!” *Psychic News*, June 23, 1945, 2.

Soul.¹¹² Rev. O'Neill believed that adding "I believe" before each of the Seven Principles gave Spiritualists their creed. He said, "Hence all the talk of religion without dogmas and without a creed is sheer flapdoodle. *What they really mean to say is that they have no true Christian beliefs.*"¹¹³

Maurice Barbanell argued that what Rev. O'Neill meant with his writing about dogma and creed was that he believed that there could be "no religion without a pope, a triple crown, resplendent robes, priests, stained-glass windows, rosaries, novenas, convents, monasteries, a 'holy' inquisition or an index expurgatorius."¹¹⁴ Barbanell claimed that the atheist is closer to God than the church-going Christian and that God is indeed not impressed with the recitation of prayers in Latin, where the prayer giver does not attempt to live an unselfish life. Further, Maurice Barbanell stated that the main difference between Spiritualism and the Roman Catholic Church was that Spiritualists "enthroned reason and reject anything *from whatever source*, which God-given reason tells us is untenable." He stated that one could not "apply the test of reason to a papal utterance," as this would be seen as "heresy."¹¹⁵ Barbanell did agree, however, with one of Father O'Neill's points being that there was nothing new in trying to communicate with spirits. Indeed, Barbanell referred to

¹¹² "Our Philosophy & the Seven Principles," Spiritualists' National Union, <https://www.snu.org.uk/7-principles>, accessed June 27, 2023. The Spiritualist Church of Canada amended the Seven Principles in 2010 "to reflect present-day language and inclusiveness." They now read: 1) Infinite Spirit, Divine Creator of All That Is; 2) Unity and Equality of All; 3) Communication, Guidance, and Healing from Spirit and Angels; 4) Continuous Existence of the Soul and its Personality; 5) Personal Responsibility for the Creation of our Reality through Thought, Word and Deed; 6) Actions create results according to Natural Law; 7) Eternal Progress open to Every Soul. Spiritualist Church of Canada, <https://www.spiritualistchurchofcanada.com/seven-principles-of-spiritualism>, accessed June 27, 2023.

¹¹³ O'Neill, *Spiritualism as Spiritualists Have Written of It*, 28. Italics O'Neill's.

¹¹⁴ Maurice Barbanell, "Priest Believes in a Talking Serpent!" *Psychic News*, June 30, 1945, 2.

¹¹⁵ Ibid.

Joan of Arc, who was burned at the stake for sharing with two spirits, whom the Catholic Church regarded as saints.

Maurice Barbanell's eighteen-week review of Rev. O'Neill's book ended in *Psychic News* in October 1945. However, ever the shrewd businessman, Barbanell published, in book form, the series of newspaper articles. *Keep the Rome Fires Burning*, a tongue-in-cheek title borne out of a conversation with Hannen Swaffer, was published in 1946 because Barbanell was "urged to reprint my series in book form."¹¹⁶ It is fair to ask who was urging Barbanell to release the book. A review of the letter section of *Psychic News* during the months the series was published does not result in much print evidence that the readers were invested in the subject. One reader sent a letter about Barbanell's review relating to the Catholic Church's belief in and teaching about Hell. This part of the church's teaching left the reader feeling "positively sick to think that such books with those terrible pictures on the subject should ever have been allowed to be printed."¹¹⁷ In his "All Worlds Are One" column, Maurice Barbanell told readers that he had received two letters about his book review in one week. One writer thought the reviews were "very good and interesting," and another reader thought Barbanell's "punch is as powerful as that of the new heavyweight champion from Doncaster."¹¹⁸ In the foreword to *Keep The Rome Fires Burning*, Barbanell noted that his "postbag was amusing and surprising," claiming he received correspondences from

¹¹⁶ Maurice Barbanell, *Keep the Rome Fires Burning* (London: Psychic Press, Ltd., 1946), 7.

¹¹⁷ Miss C.M. Bayley to the Editor, "Does Rome Believe It?" *Psychic News*, August 4, 1945, 6.

¹¹⁸ Maurice Barbanell, "Take Your Choice," *Psychic News*, July 28, 1945, 4.

supporters of the Catholic Church who did not like his view of O'Neill's book, including a frequent writer whose "letters were replete with vulgar abuse."¹¹⁹

It is surprising that Maurice Barbanell published few of the letters of support he said he received or the letters that vilified him for his review of *Spiritualism as Spiritualists Have Written of It*. Chapter 2 clearly demonstrates how Barbanell was not averse to publishing good and bad comments aimed at himself. In the case of Rev. O'Neill, Barbanell wrote that the priest did not respond to him once during the entire eighteen weeks he spent reviewing the book. It was only after the review concluded that Barbanell heard from O'Neill, reporting in *Psychic News* that he had received "vulgar abuse" from O'Neill, including anti-Semitism, "in what he [O'Neill] calls my [Barbanell's] 'Yiddish editing.'"¹²⁰ The following week, Barbanell reported that the Catholic Father had written again. Deciding not to publish the letter, Barbanell shared with his readers that O'Neill "concedes that it was not in the best of taste and mentioned, among other things, that one of his best friends is a Jew." What was Barbanell's one-line retort? "Well, one of my best friends was a Roman Catholic – until I converted her to Spiritualism."¹²¹

A search of *Psychic News* shows that the controversy surrounding both Rev. O'Neill's and Maurice Barbanell's books was short-lived. Journalist Paul Miller, the same man involved in Nandor Fodor's libel case against the newspaper (discussed in Chapter 2) wrote an article about the situation in March 1946 when Psychic Press published *Keep the*

¹¹⁹ Barbanell, *Keep the Rome Fires Burning*, 8.

¹²⁰ Maurice Barbanell, "Abusive Priest," *Psychic News*, November 24, 1945, 4.

¹²¹ Maurice Barbanell, "Priest's Second Thoughts," *Psychic News*, December 1, 1945, 4.

Rome Fires Burning. Miller had nothing new to add to the story, remarking on the many misstatements made by Roman Catholics about Spiritualism and how Maurice Barbanell believed that “attack is the best method of defence of truth.”¹²² Barbanell published no further words about this battle of words. Perhaps the lack of engagement from O’Neill removed the fuel from the fire inside the newspaper editor that, as we have seen, he drew upon to wage his battles against those who spoke out against Spiritualism.¹²³

Maurice Barbanell's wars against organized religion are not surprising, given the considerable time he spent defending his faith and beliefs against fraudsters. Like the myriad legal actions in which he was involved (discussed in Chapter 2), Barbanell effectively used *Psychic News* as his platform to mount and fight his campaigns against the Church of England and the Roman Catholic Church. Both institutions were evidently vexed by the newspaper editor’s constant provocations and his “unremitting hostility to the Church.”¹²⁴ These episodes in Maurice Barbanell’s life highlight his devotion to Spiritualism and further cement his role as a significant propagandist in the movement’s history. Leaving aside now Barbanell’s provocations, we will turn our attention to spirit guides, including a study of their racialized identities. We will also explore whether Silver Birch was merely Barbanell’s

¹²² Paul Miller, “Keep the Rome Fires Burning. Psychic News Series in Book Form,” *Psychic News*, March 9, 1946, 7.

¹²³ Little is known about Rev. Herbert V. O’Neill. The Archdiocese of Liverpool, England, provided the following: “Son of Thomas and Maria-Teresa O’Neill (née McMahon); born Liverpool (Edge Lane) 2 July 1884; educated at SFX [school/college], then Upholland [minor/major seminary]; ordained priest 23 April 1911, appointed honorary Canon 1961; curate at Our Lady, Eldon Street, Liverpool, until 1917; Chaplain to the Forces until 1921; curate at St James, Bootle, until 1926; first parish priest of St Joan of Arc, Bootle, [founded 1926] until retirement in 1958; died 30 November 1963. Published several pieces on Spiritualism, hauntings etc.” Private email message to author, July 20, 2023.

¹²⁴ Church Information Office, “Spiritual Unveiling – 40 Years On,” March 1, 1979. Coggan papers, vol. 74. Lambeth Palace Library.

subconscious mind by comparing an address the medium gave with the teachings of his spirit guide.

Chapter 4

Racialized Spirits and the Subliminal Mind.

The test of truth is not the colour of its messenger's skin nor his ability to speak English. It is certainly untrue to suggest that a white skin or the ability to speak English is the hallmark of divine truth. All God's children have a part to play in His scheme.

– Maurice Barbanell¹

In *Talking to the Other Side*, Todd Leonard wrote that “mediumship or the ability to communicate with those who have passed from this earth life is the primary purpose of the... religion of Spiritualism; and is the ultimate goal of Spiritualists – to communicate with those in the spirit world.”² This communication of messages, whether evidential or of a philosophical nature, occurs with the help of a spirit guide, or guides, who work to help and support the medium with their mediumistic work. The belief is also held that it is not only mediums who work with spirit guides, but “each human has at least one spirit guide to assist the individual along the pathway of life.”³ Spirit guides are also known as a “control” as they do exactly that, they “control” the medium they work with as they channel messages from the other world. Though every human is said to have a spirit guide, as one guide said, “We have no power to work out for man the salvation which he must work out for himself; but we are able to aid, to comfort, and to support.”⁴ Spirit guides are said to “have

¹ The Editor, “The Garb of Truth,” *Psychic News*, February 2, 1935, 11.

² Todd Jay Leonard, *Talking to the Other Side: A History of Modern Spiritualism and Mediumship: A Study of the Religion, Science, Philosophy and Mediums That Encompass This American-Made Religion* (New York: Universe, 2005), 103. One could argue here that this goal would be shared by Spiritualists around the world, not just in the United States of America.

³ Walter Meyer zu Erpen, “Afterlife Beliefs in the Spiritualist Movement,” in *The Routledge Companion to Death and Dying* (London ; New York: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2018), 225.

⁴ Stafford Betty, “The World of Light According to Spiritualism,” in *The Spiritualist Movement. Speaking with the Dead in America and around the World*, vol. 2 (Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger, 2013), 14.

renounced their rightful evolutionary progress in the spirit world so that they return to serve humanity.”⁵ During trance mediumship, the medium’s “normal personality” is “completely dispossessed by the intruding intelligence, which achieves a varying degree of control over the medium’s speech, writing, and entire neuromuscular apparatus. The medium herself retains little or no recollection of what has been said or done in her “absence,” though sometimes she may on awakening seem to remember scenes and persons from some other sphere of existence.”⁶ During this time in trance, the spirit guide will have imparted their wisdom to the crowd that had gathered to hear them speak through the medium.

For Silver Birch, the question of the existence of spirit guides was “rather a complex subject,” stating that he “preferred to use the word ‘individuality’ rather than ‘personality.’” He defined individuality as the “soul or spiritual make-up” whereas the personality was purely physical.⁷ Wilma Trebell, former Spiritualist minister, said that “having been active in Spiritualism for over thirty-two years, I can say that Spirit Guides are the source of much self-deception. I would even say that most of them are creations of the Spiritualist’s imagination and often show hardly more intelligence than their charges.”⁸

The subject of spirit guides is arguably a perplexing and complicated one that has presented itself throughout the history of Spiritualism. This chapter will discuss two of the reasons why spirit guides are, and have been, problematic: Firstly, the spectral personalities or entities of Indigenous American origin, or of other racialized entities coming from Africa, the Middle East, and Asia made regular appearances in the séances rooms of England and North America. Secondly, as Trebell

⁵ Sylvia Barbanell, *Some Discern Spirits*, 3rd ed. (Oxshott, UK: Spiritual Truth Press, 2019), 22.

⁶ Alan Gauld, *Mediumship and Survival: A Century of Investigations* (London: Paladin, published on behalf of the Society for Psychical Research, 1983), 29.

⁷ Silver Birch and Pam Riva, *Light from Silver Birch* (Oxshott: Spiritual Truth Press, 2009), 90.

⁸ Wilma Trebell, Interview with Wilma Trebell, interview by Nick Richbell, February 18, 2023.

inferred, it has been argued that the spirit guides are merely the imagination or subconscious mind of the medium.⁹ The nature of spirit guides in general is a lesser studied aspect of Spiritualism, because “its phenomena – the spirits – themselves remain remarkably resilient to empirical inquiry.”¹⁰

Robert S. Cox wrote that the Spiritualist was “playing Indian” as they communicated with the spirits of Indigenous Americans who had transitioned to the other world. Molly McGarry proclaimed that while “Spiritualists positioned Native Americans as a vital link between this world and the next,” they “saw Native Americans as powerful spiritual predecessors, evincing romantic attachments to an ideal or imagined Indian that sometimes amounted to unexamined cultural appropriation.”¹¹ Cox argued that Spiritualists maintained that their Indigenous American spirit guides resided in a lower plane in the afterlife where they “conducted themselves as they had for centuries, fearing technologies such as steam and rail when they were introduced or taking a naively gleeful, uncomprehending, childlike pleasure in them.”¹² McGarry argued that these spirit guides were appearing in the séance room as “Indians were being literally erased from the national landscape through ongoing dispossession and removal acts.”¹³ McGarry further posited that “Neither wholly appropriative nor simply reformist, the history of Anglo Spiritualists’ ambivalent affiliations with American Indians

⁹ It is important to acknowledge that these questions, especially around race and identity in the séance room, could have been the sole focus of my study. This chapter serves merely as an introduction to the issues raised. The author acknowledges that they merit a more in-depth study than the space in this dissertation allows. Furthermore, the language used in this chapter is based upon the original texts and therefore representative of its time. The author does not support use of that language today.

¹⁰ Alex Owen, *The Darkened Room: Women, Power, and Spiritualism in Late Victorian England*, The New Cultural Studies Series (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1990), xiii.

¹¹ Robert S. Cox, *Body and Soul: A Sympathetic History of American Spiritualism* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2003), 191; Molly McGarry, *Ghosts of Futures Past: Spiritualism and the Cultural Politics of Nineteenth-Century America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008), 15.

¹² Cox, *Body and Soul*, 193.

¹³ McGarry, *Ghosts of Futures Past*, 67.

raises questions about the importance of a specifically religious worldview to the construction of secular politics.”¹⁴

While Cox and McGarry offered only short treatment of Indigenous American spirit guides, Kathryn Troy believed that “the complexity of Indian manifestations deserves to be analyzed in its own right,” with a focus on the “reappropriation of Indian cultures.”¹⁵ Troy successfully accomplishes this in her work, *The Specter of the Indian. Race, Gender, and Ghosts in American Séances, 1848-1890*, a unique contribution to the literature on Spiritualism. Troy effectively ties together different aspects of the “Indian question.” One was séance participants who heard the stereotyped voice of, for instance, Black Hawk as he spoke through his medium Jennie Lord. Another was the gendered difference between the powerful male “Indian” chiefs who presented themselves in séances, compared to “female spirits” who “were categorized as the innocent, naturalistic, and highly sympathetic victims of Indian warfare and interracial violence.”¹⁶

Indigenous American spirit guides were joined in the séance room by other racialized spirit forms. Alex Owen, Janet Oppenheim, and Marlene Tromp have written about Annie Fairlamb and Catherine Wood, two Victorian British mediums who were able to climb the economic ladder as they worked with a variety of spirit guides who took quite different forms.¹⁷ Fairlamb and Wood were known to materialize the spirits of children of colour, Fairlamb “a very young African child spirit

¹⁴ McGarry, 67.

¹⁵ Kathryn L. Troy, *The Specter of the Indian: Race, Gender, and Ghosts in American Séances, 1848-1890* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2017), xvii.

¹⁶ Troy, 91.

¹⁷ Owen, *The Darkened Room*, 56–74; Janet Oppenheim, *The Other World: Spiritualism and Psychical Research in England, 1850-1914* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 126; Marlene Tromp, *Altered States: Sex, Nation, Drugs, and Self-Transformation in Victorian Spiritualism* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2006), 99–126.

named Cissy,” and Wood “a five-year-old Indian spirit called Pocky.”¹⁸ Elizabeth d’Espérance, another materialization medium, was controlled by female spirits including a Spanish girl named Nina, a teenaged Turkish girl named Leila, and most importantly according to Tromp, by Yolande, a teenaged Arab girl.¹⁹ Just as we see the colonization of Indigenous Americans in the séance room, here we see “the blurring of the line between the English mediums and the Indian, African, and Middle Eastern spirits dislocated a monolithic understanding of people in colonized nations, and in turn created rifts in the fabric of imperial politics.”²⁰

During the 1930s, Harry Emerson befriended the British medium, Hunter Selkirk, and he attended séances that included “Zuru,” Selkirk’s “chief guide and guardian...an old African Negro, a kind gentle old soul whose very manner of speech is comforting.”²¹ A frequent visitor to the Selkirk séance room was “Topsy, a little coloured girl who is very witty,” and whose job was “to create harmony and good conditions for other visitors.”²² Topsy’s “voice is that of a gay, contented child, quite unlike the medium’s voice.”²³ Emerson’s stories of his séance experiences are replete with colonial and racist language and as Tromp stated “it is not surprising that [children’s] spirit depictions bears the mark of many standard imperial stereotypes.”²⁴ Topsy, having fully materialised during a séance, was described as her “face was coal black,” and later “Her white teeth showed up very

¹⁸ Tromp, *Altered States*, 102. Pocky has also been referred to as Pocha; see Frank Podmore, *Studies in Psychical Research* (London: G. P. Putnam’s Sons, 1897), 24.

¹⁹ Tromp, 81–82. Outside of the scope of this dissertation, but important to read and understand the sexual politics of the Victorian séance room, Tromp examines the sexuality of both Yolande, as well as the child spirits of Fairlamb and Wood. When those guides materialised, they were often without clothes and kissed the male séance sitters.

²⁰ Tromp, 78.

²¹ Harry Emerson, *Listen My Son* (London: Psychic Book Club, 1945), 24.

²² *Ibid.*, 29.

²³ *Ibid.*, 29.

²⁴ Marlene Tromp, “Spirited Sexuality: Sex, Marriage, and Victorian Spiritualism,” *Victorian Literature and Culture* 31, no. 1 (2003): 125.

distinctly in contrast to her little black face.”²⁵ Topsy was not alone. Emerson further describes, “Then there came the coloured brigade, Jacko, Poppy, Billy Boy, Louisiana and Sambo.”²⁶

“Significantly,” wrote Marlene Tromp, “in each nation, the ghosts of that country’s colonized people were materialised at the séance, the haunting of the nation’s builders.”²⁷ Harry Emerson saw Indian and African children appear in the North of England. Racialized other-worldly beings were found across the world. During the twentieth century, both in England and North America, Ursula Roberts worked at one time with the spirit guide, Tek-sek, an ancient Egyptian who told the story through his medium of how he knew Moses. Roberts wrote that she had only visited Egypt once and she had “never made any serious study of the Bible or Egyptology.”²⁸ Leonora Piper’s guide was “a red Indian girl named ‘Chlorine’” who was replaced after one-year by a French doctor, Dr. Phinuit.²⁹ Eileen Garrett was the channel for “‘Uvani,’ an entity or ‘control’ personality of oriental origin.”³⁰ The spirit guide, Jai-Lin, even appeared in Toronto as recently as the 1980s; he was a Tibetan lama who appeared next to his channel as “a large Oriental man dressed in monk’s clothing.”³¹ No matter where the racialized spirit appeared, “mediumship...often provided a voice for an alternative way of understanding, seeing, and embodying the colonial subject,” and was, “consonant with its seeming location on the social margins.” Māori spirits were even materialised when the medium Annie Fairlamb toured Australia.³²

²⁵ Emerson, 37, 52.

²⁶ Ibid., 43.

²⁷ Tromp, *Altered States*, 93.

²⁸ Ursula Roberts, *I Knew Moses* (London: Psychic Press, 1974), vii.

²⁹ Gauld, *Mediumship and Survival*, 32.

³⁰ Eileen Jeanette Lyttle Garrett, *Many Voices: The Autobiography of a Medium*, Collector’s Library of the Unknown (Alexandria, VA: Time-Life Books, 1991), 47.

³¹ Joe Fisher, *Hungry Ghosts: An Investigation into Channelling and the Spirit World* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1991), 18.

³² Tromp, *Altered States*, 93.

Doubts about the racial background of spirit guides have been raised since the early days of the Spiritualist movement. Were mediums, including trance mediums such as Maurice Barbanell, working from their subconscious memory, or even suffering from some form of mental disorder as they channelled spirits from the other world. Psychologists, psychiatrists, and psychical researchers have used a variety of terminologies to diagnose mediumship as anything other than a pure channelling of a spirit entity. Terms used throughout the history of Modern Spiritualism include, but are not limited to, “dissociation,” “multiple personalities,” “possession,” and “secondary personality.”³³ Further, mediums, notably women, during the late 1800s were even said to be suffering from ‘mediomania’ “a very ancient form of derangement.” They were considered to be “insane,” thus dismissing true mediumship as a mental illness.³⁴ In fact, Frederic R. Marvin who created the term ‘mediomania’ stated that:

Mediomania, while it often attacks men, and from other than sexual causes, more frequently assails women, and is usually preceded by a genito or venerio-pathological history. Men are more likely to suffer from such cerebral disorders as apoplexy, hemiplegia, ramollissement, and general paralysis, while women are subject to such disorders as chorea, hysteria, and utromania.³⁵

³³ For a concise history, see Carlos S. Alvarado, “Dissociation and the Unconscious Mind: Nineteenth-Century Perspectives on Mediumship,” *Journal of Scientific Exploration* 34, no. 3 (September 15, 2020): 537 – 596, <https://doi.org/10.31275/20201735>. For examples of multiple personalities, obsession, and possession, see: Adam Crabtree, *Multiple Man: Explorations in Possession and Multiple Personality* (New York: Praeger, 1985), Alan Gauld, *Mediumship and Survival: A Century of Investigations* (London, UK: Paladin, published on behalf of the Society for Psychical Research, 1983), 111-113; Ian Hacking, *Rewriting the Soul: Multiple Personality and the Sciences of Memory* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995); F.W.H. Myers, *Human Personality and Its Survival of Bodily Death* (New York: University Books, Inc., 1961), 55-61; and Carl August Wickland, *Thirty Years Among The Dead* (London: Spiritualist Press, Ltd., 1968).

³⁴ Frederic Rowland Marvin, *The Philosophy of Spiritualism and the Pathology and Treatment of Mediomania: Two Lectures*. (New York: A. K. Butts & Co., 1874), 35.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 38. For further background on how women mediums were labelled as suffering from *hysteria*, see Sofie Lachappelle, *Investigating the Supernatural. From Spiritism and Occultism to Psychical Research and Metaphysics in France, 1853 – 1931* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2011), 59-85.

This chapter will explore Maurice Barbanell's trance mediumship as it related to the possibility of Silver Birch being a secondary personality of his medium. It is helpful to briefly explain what happens when a medium enters into trance. Trance mediumship is reported to take place when the medium:

falls into a trance, during which his spirit partially 'quits his body': enters at any rate into a state in which the spiritual world is more or less open to its perception; and in which also – and this is the novelty – it so far ceases to occupy the organism so as to leave room for an invading spirit to use it in somewhat the same fashion as its owner is accustomed to use it.³⁶

When Barbanell first went into the trance state, he could hear all the words spoken in the séance room before seemingly being able to listen from a distance. Barbanell then wrote that after a séance when he retired to bed, “every word that had been uttered appeared as if on an unfolding screen before I went to sleep at night” even though he had been unconscious during the séance.³⁷ Al Batten, a trance healer and speaker, commented that the experience of going into trance was “a fascinating subject because you do not really know whether it's you or somebody else.”³⁸ As discussed in chapter one, some mediums discovered their trance abilities quite by accident, whereas for Batten “it was by design.” During trance, Al Batten is aware that he is speaking, yet he does not remember the words he spoke after coming out of the trance state. “You get to a point where something happens,” Batten stated, “you just sense that something changes. It's hard to describe, but you're going through this process of breathing, trying to take everything out of your mind, and then something changes. It's like a rush and you start to speak.”³⁹ Trance has always been a wonder for Al Batten and he openly

³⁶ Myers, *Human Personality and Its Survival of Bodily Death*, 345-346.

³⁷ Maurice Barbanell, “Who is Silver Birch's medium?” *Two Worlds*, August 24, 1957, 3.

³⁸ Al Batten, Interview with Al Batten, interview by Nick Richbell, April 27, 2023.

³⁹ Ibid.

questions whether it is his subconscious mind that is in operation or “some other element that’s coming in entirely on their own volition.”⁴⁰

The ‘Indian Question’ during Barbanell’s Lifetime

In the foreword to the first book of Silver Birch’s published teachings, Hannen Swaffer wrote that the spirit guide told his home circle that he “had to come in the form of a humble Indian to win your love and devotion.” Swaffer shared that in the early days of the home circle, “Silver Birch spoke very few words of English, and those with a very crude accent.”⁴¹ This, however, soon changed when it was reported that, “Silver Birch’s words flow in perfect English.”⁴² The Hannen Swaffer home circle with Silver Birch always started and ended with a prayer, or invocation, given by the spirit guide. One invited sitter told how the prayers would “have a similarity of theme, but the words are always different.” The exception was how Silver Birch closed the prayer. He always ended the prayer with: “This is the prayer of Thy Indian servant who always seeks to serve.”⁴³ Furthermore, during a séance in 1940, Silver Birch said: “I lived once as a Red Indian, held up to children as the example of savagery. But never have I seen amongst the tribe in which I dwelt anything that by the remotest possibility compares with the savageries practised by the civilised people of your world.”⁴⁴ Hannen Swaffer proclaimed that Silver Birch was “not a Red Indian. Who he is, we do not know. We assume that he uses the name of the spirit through whose astral body he expresses himself, it being impossible for the high vibration of the spiritual realm to which life belongs to manifest except through some other instrument.”⁴⁵ This statement appears contradictory. On the one hand, Swaffer states that the

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ A.W. Austen, ed., *Teachings of Silver Birch* (Oxshott, UK: Spiritual Truth Press, 2011), 12.

⁴² Hannen Swaffer, “Silver Birch’s Teachings Now Published in Book Form,” *Psychic News*, March 26, 1938, 4.

⁴³ Anne Dooley, ed., *Guidance from Silver Birch* (Oxshott, UK: Spiritual Truth Press, 1999), 114.

⁴⁴ “Silver Birch Gives Inspiring Message to all Reformers,” *Psychic News*, November 23, 1940, 3.

⁴⁵ Austen, *Teachings of Silver Birch*, 11.

spirit guide is not a “Red Indian” and then states that the guide’s origins are unknown. This contradiction speaks to the problematic nature of spirit guides and how difficult it is to provide evidence of their worldly existence. The exact origins of Silver Birch are unknown as the spirit guide never revealed his identity, despite promising to do so one day. Silver Birch did, however, state:

Silver Birch is not my name. It is the name of the Indian spirit I use as a transformer that enables me to lower my vibrations and reach your world. The name does not matter...

I am not a Red Indian. I belong to another race in another part of the world that goes back much further...⁴⁶

The question remains, however, as to why Silver Birch chose to appear in the body of, and made claims to be, an Indigenous American? It was reported that Red Cloud, Estelle Roberts’ spirit guide said, “I show myself in a body you can comprehend because of your finite mind. Although I spoke with the voice of Red Cloud I was operating through the body of Yusepha.”⁴⁷ It is important to acknowledge here that there is a performative aspect to the séance room visits by Silver Birch and other spirit guides of Indigenous American appearance. Writing about the appearances of Indigenous American spirit guides in 1830s and 1840s Shaker and spiritualist séances, Bridget Bennett stated “the abiding presence of Indian spirit guides and spirits within séances...are part of an evolving cultural tradition of representing the Indian on the stage, as well as in novels, poetry, and visual culture that stage the Indian as an apparitional presence with a strong cultural impact upon the present and future, as well as the past.”⁴⁸ Adding to Bennett’s notion of the séance as a performance, Robert C. Thompson wrote of the presence of Native American spirits at a series of séances in Vermont

⁴⁶ Riva, *Light from Silver Birch*, 198.

⁴⁷ Edwin H. Turpin, Letter to the Editor, “Who is Red Cloud?” *Psychic News*, April 3, 1937, 11.

⁴⁸ Bridget Bennett, “Sacred Theatres: Shakers, Spiritualists, Theatricality, and the Indian in the 1830s and 1840s,” *TDR* 49, no. 3 (Autumn 2005): 116.

whereby the materialized spirits “presented a more sensually full performance than their fellow spirits – moving closer to spectators for a visual inspection...even going so far as to make physical contact with the audience.”⁴⁹

Silver Birch told the Hannen Swaffer home circle: “I had to come in the form of a humble Indian to win your love and devotion, not by the use of any high-sounding name, and to prove myself by the truth of what I taught. That is the Law.”⁵⁰ Rev. Karen Charles believes that we have seen Indigenous guides throughout the history of Spiritualism owing to the “Indigenous philosophy...they were very much about the earth. The energy, and everything you take from the earth, you must also give back. You must be respectful.” Rev. Charles also said that Indigenous “philosophy aligned well with what Spiritualism was trying to portray. It wasn’t clogged up with dogma and creed.”⁵¹ Similarly, Rev. Angie Morra, when speaking of the history of Indigenous American spirit guides at the time of Silver Birch, stated that “people would understand the connection of the history between the Indians and mankind, what happened to them. They were a group of people that lived with the land, not against the land, and they all worked together to be as one instead of being separated like the rest of us were.”⁵² Roy Stemman, who worked with Maurice Barbanell and attended two séances where Silver Birch spoke, said that the question of the spirit guide’s identity was never discussed at length with Maurice Barbanell, but he recalled it was a popular subject among the readers of *Psychic News*. Letters were often published with the question as to why spirits guides were so often “Red Indians” or Chinese. Stemman believed “that there had to be some sort of exotic aspect of the

⁴⁹ Robert C. Thompson, “Henry Olcott’s Sensual Spirits: The American Indian as Spiritualist Spectacle..,” *Ecumenica* 8, no. 2 (October 2015): 29.

⁵⁰ Hannen Swaffer, “Silver Birch’s Teachings Now Published in Book Form,” *Psychic News*, March 26, 1938, 3.

⁵¹ Karen Charles, Interview with Rev. Karen Charles, interview by Nick Richbell, November 5, 2022.

⁵² Angie Morra, Interview with Rev. Angie Morra, interview by Nick Richbell, November 25, 2022.

personality of the guide...I think people were just more open to accepting the spiritual teachings that were being offered if they came from a source that was maybe more in touch with nature.” Roy Stemman concluded that this aspect of Spiritualism had always been a mystery to him.⁵³ One letter writer went so far as to suggest that Silver Birch was a multitude of entities presenting as one spirit guide:

The fine personality, the wisdom and the knowledge which run through his lips could not possibly be the product of only *one* lifetime passed as a Red Indian on the plains of North America. No! Behind that existence lie many lives in many lands and we are now getting the benefit of the wisdom Silver Birch has accumulated during these lives and the intervening periods passed in the spheres.⁵⁴

Reviewing the book, *Gospel of the Red Man. An Indian Bible*, *Psychic News* boldly claimed that “this book proves that the Red Indian race was always highly psychic.”⁵⁵ Writing that “the culture of the Red man is fundamentally spiritual,” Ernest Seton Thompson continued that “His [Indigenous American] mode of life, his thought, his every act, are given spiritual significance, approached and colored with complete realization of the spirit world.”⁵⁶ The ‘North American Indian’ believed in the afterlife, yet knew not what to expect when their time on earth ended, simply holding the belief that if they had lived well “he need have no concern for his future well-being.”⁵⁷ In fact, Psychic Press re-printed *Gospel of the Red Man* in 1970 claiming that “the Redman’s religion was

⁵³ Roy Stemman, Interview with Roy Stemman, interview by Nick Richbell, October 27, 2022.

⁵⁴ J. Bardell Smith, “Who Is Silver Birch?” *Psychic News*, April 2, 1938, 11.

⁵⁵ “This Book Proves That the Red Indian Race Was Always Highly Psychic,” *Psychic News*, February 12, 1938, 8.

⁵⁶ Ernest Thompson Seton, *The Gospel of the Red Man. An Indian Bible* (New York: Doubleday, Doran & Company, Inc., 1937), 1.

⁵⁷ Seton, 6–7.

Spiritualism.”⁵⁸ We can also note that these comments from the 1930s are not too distant from those discussed by present-day Spiritualists above.

Did all Spiritualists and mediums believe in the veracity of Indigenous American spirit guides? The brief answer is: no. This was a subject that was well covered between the pages of the Spiritualist press.⁵⁹ Clifford W. Potter, a British medium, asked: “who are these guides, are they necessary, what is their purpose, and what effect do they produce?” Potter stated that it may be the case that “Red Indian” guides were common due to their natural gifts of communicating with the living, yet he stated that “many thousands of other spirits find no great difficulty in communicating.” Potter continued:

It seems ridiculous and absurd for educated white people to listen to lectures by Red Indians. With all due modesty, without the slightest feeling of race-superiority, and with all respect to the mediums concerned, I feel that their Indian guides lower the standard of the movement to that of the variety stage and music-hall. There may be something colourful in hearing broken English spoken by a spirit from the next world, but *why should it be broken?* Merely because the credulous public likes to hear it so. That can be the only explanation. Frankly, it’s terrible!⁶⁰

Potter’s pointed statements certainly provoked a reaction among the writers and readers of *Psychic News*. Maurice Barbanell started his offensive in his ‘All Worlds Are One’ section of the newspaper stating that Potter’s criticism about Indian guides was “entirely worthless” especially as the medium had admitted to never hearing the guides of Estelle Roberts, Kathleen Barkel, or Horace

⁵⁸ Gordon Turner, “Perfect Reply to Sneers at Red Indian Guides,” *Psychic News*, September 26, 1970, 2.

⁵⁹ Between 1932 and the end of 1981, the *Psychic News* archives returned 444 references to “Red Indian” and 216 references to “American Indian.” Two references to “Native American” were retrieved for 1975 and 1978.

⁶⁰ Clifford W. Potter, “Spiritualism and Its Red Indian Guides,” *The London Forum Incorporating The Occult Review* LXI, no. January to June 1935 (January 1935): 29.

Hambling, all guides he criticized in his essay.⁶¹ Clifford Potter, according to the next issue of *Psychic News*, disputed Barbanell's comments claiming that he had nothing against the spirit guides, but he was actually "against the general and deplorable tendency to 'Red Indianise' the Spiritualist movement." Potter added that the Red Indian guide was imported to England along with Spiritualism itself.⁶² Barbanell published Potter's response where he attempted to clarify his position, "I do not object to Red Indian Spirits speaking to us, but that they should monopolise our platforms as they are beginning to do, assuming the role of our spiritual mentors, is intolerable... This tendency to 'colour' the spirit world is a deplorable response to public credulity."⁶³ Potter's father, Rev. J.W. Potter, also joined the fray writing that his son's African spirit guide, Umtazare, was only present for "one-tenth of the time... most of the time being occupied by teachers and guides who spoke in correct English."⁶⁴ Father and son clearly shared the same racist and prejudiced views.

Horace Hambling, medium for the spirit guide Moon Trail, also contributed to the ongoing public discussion about Clifford Potter's attack on Indigenous spirit guides. Hambling, because Potter had never heard Moon Trail speak, noted that, "those who remain away from Worley Hall [where Hambling gave public demonstrations of mediumship], refusing to listen to a Red Indian, are unaware of this guide's vital message or they would not remain away. They at least are incompetent judges."⁶⁵ Maurice Barbanell published letters the newspaper received from its readers, both from those against Potter's viewpoint, as well as those in agreement, clearly trying to provide a more balanced view of

⁶¹ Maurice Barbanell, "Valueless Criticism," *Psychic News*, January 12, 1935, 6.

⁶² "Coloured Guides Attacked. By a Medium Who Has One of Them!" January 19, 1935, *Psychic News*, 5. The article also notes that, according to Hannen Swaffer, writing in his book *Northcliffe Returns*, Potter himself worked with a spirit guide of African origin who spoke with broken English leading the article's writer to ask how the medium could speak out against Indigenous American guides when "his own guide behaved the same way." See Hannen Swaffer, *Northcliffe Returns* (London: Psychic Book Club, 1925), 68.

⁶³ Clifford Potter, "Those Red Indian Guides," *Psychic News*, January 26, 1935, 11.

⁶⁴ Rev. J.W. Potter, "The Garb of Truth," *Psychic News*, February 2, 1935, 11.

⁶⁵ Horace Hambling, "Red Indian Guides Championed. Moon Trail's Medium Answers a Critic," *Psychic News*, February 9, 1935, 8.

the argument. One reader noted that, “It matters very little whether it is a red or white skin manifesting; what does matter is the spiritual medium and integrity of the medium,” which Horace Hambling considered abundantly proven OR established.⁶⁶ Another reader’s opinion was that “Clifford Potter should recognise that one good Red Indian is better than a whole crowd of bad whites.”⁶⁷ Another reader was “in agreement with Clifford Potter in his sane criticism of a weakness in our Movement...If Indian guides are justified by our mentality, and we say that God knows best, still we can deplore the circumstances that give rise to the fact. Were we on a higher plane we might attract other guides.” This reader claimed it had become fashionable to use “strange names as a special attraction at a Spiritualist service.”⁶⁸

The veracity of Indigenous American spirit guides was a recurrent topic in the pages of *Psychic News* over the course of Maurice Barbanell’s editorship. One reader of *Psychic News* suggested that because “Red Indians and other so-called primitive tribes are dependent upon Nature for many things,” they had understood the Laws of Nature more than the “civilised races,” who were far removed from Nature. This closeness to nature of the “Red Indian” allowed them to “proceed to learn the higher knowledge” and made them better spirit guides.⁶⁹ Another letter published in the newspaper noted that “Indian guides” were so prominent with English mediums because “the medicine men are mediums and know more about this subject [Spiritualism] than the so-called Christian race. They have materialisations in daylight. Clairvoyance is a common gift. A great number in every tribe see visions.”⁷⁰ Another letter echoed earlier sentiments that it was due to their closeness to nature that explains why Indigenous Americans were “chosen to pierce the psychic veil,”

⁶⁶ Dorothy Neaves, Letter to the Editor, *Psychic News*, February 9, 1935, 8.

⁶⁷ H.H.P.S., Letter to the Editor, *Psychic News*, February 9, 1935, 8.

⁶⁸ Frederick H. Haines, Letter to the Editor, *Psychic News*, February 9, 1935, 8.

⁶⁹ F.J. Athey-Pollard, Letter to the Editor, “The Superior Red Indians,” *Psychic News*, February 23, 1935, 11.

⁷⁰ (Detective) Albert W. Rawson, Letter to the Editor, “Psychic Red Indians,” *Psychic News*, March 2, 1935, 11.

with the reader continuing to state that during a séance, “If it wasn’t a Red Indian, it was someone of the East, a Hindu, Arab, Egyptian, or African, but very, very few ‘white’ people” came through in spirit form.⁷¹ An advertisement in *Psychic News* in 1935 invited people to attend a lecture at the British College of Psychic Science in London to hear a Mr. T. Dudley Parson’s “Red Indian Controls.”⁷²

Frederic Harding, an American Spiritualist writing in 1935, commented that newcomers to Spiritualism, as well as some who had been involved in the movement for some time, were puzzled as to the “frequency with which there appear from the Spirit-side of life, members of a race of people [Indigenous Americans] which had not been thought about since childhood’s adventurous imaginings.”⁷³ Similar to comments printed in *Psychic News*, the Spiritualist, in answering the question as to ‘why Red Indians are spirit guides,’ noted that for Indigenous Americans “things of the Spirit came very easily and naturally to these people while they were still in the flesh.” Also important was “their great love for their land and all it contained. They loved its superb scenic beauty.”⁷⁴ Furthermore, Harding wrote that the

‘Red People’ never thought of God as a Man who sat on a throne... They regarded the Infinite as a Power with an intelligence whose might extended everywhere into all things. They had no creeds nor clergy, nor mythological systems of deities. They worshipped one God. And they called this Power that thought life into all living things, ‘Manitou’ or in their tongue, ‘The Great Spirit.’⁷⁵

⁷¹ R.B. Gibson, Letter to the Editor, “Tribute to Indian Guides,” *Psychic News*, March 23, 1935, 11.

⁷² Advertisement, *Psychic News*, May 25, 1935, 12.

⁷³ Frederic Harding, *Why Red Indians Are Spirit Guides*. (New York?, 1935), 3.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 5.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 5-6.

But why were there so many spirit guides of Indigenous American origin when on the earth they had been subjected to the “white man’s greed, his abuse...his false trading, his loose moral code, his inconsistent religious life, and above all his ‘fire water,’ which gradually and inevitably corrupted, embittered and ruined the spiritual life of the Red People”?⁷⁶ The Spiritualist chose to focus on the life of the Indigenous American before their land was invaded whereas Maurice Barbanell wrote that “these Redmen return from the Other Side with love in their hearts and a great desire to serve.”⁷⁷ Or, as Molly McGarry argued, “Spiritualists joined nineteenth-century culture in romanticizing Native Americans as a people at one with nature, untainted by civilization, and blessed by an innate spiritual quality untouched by modernity. Indians, however, spoke uniquely to Spiritualists, precisely because they literally spoke through them.”⁷⁸ Spiritualists, McGarry continued, “appropriated Native Americans as ancestors, precursors, and spiritual teachers,” and in doing so, “they consistently projected these spirits into an afterworld that both rationalized and validated Indians’ passing from this world.”⁷⁹ Furthermore, the absence of living Indigenous Americans in attendance at a séance allowed spiritualists “to define the American Indian in the ways that were most convenient for them,” mostly in stereotypical ways.⁸⁰

The presence of Indigenous American spirit guides was more involved than simply owing to their nature loving ways, although “Native Americans’ identification with the natural, unspoiled, and authentic rendered them potent signifiers for truth and honesty.”⁸¹ Spiritualists “needed Indian spirit guides to illuminate their own evolving cosmology.”⁸² The relationship between Spiritualists and

⁷⁶ Ibid., 9.

⁷⁷ Maurice Barbanell, “Truth About Redman,” *Psychic News*, August 8, 1942, 4.

⁷⁸ McGarry, *Ghosts of Futures Past*, 72.

⁷⁹ McGarry, 73.

⁸⁰ Thompson, “Henry Olcott’s Sensual Spirits: The American Indian as Spiritualist Spectacle.,” 32.

⁸¹ Thompson, 32.

⁸² McGarry, *Ghosts of Futures Past*, 81.

Native Americans is clearly complicated. Spiritualists wanted to speak out against the persecution of Indigenous Americans, while at the same time they continued to perform acts of colonization within the boundaries of the séance room. Denise Kimber Buell stated:

The passivity central to communication through mediums alters the typical understanding of colonial relations in which the colonizer is active and the colonized passive. That is, rather than simply representing ‘natives’ because they cannot represent themselves, Theosophists and spiritualists were prepared to hear spiritual truths from ‘native’ spirits whose teachings might lead to critiques of colonial administration.⁸³

Silver Birch was not the only spirit guide of Indigenous American appearance to frequent the séance rooms of Great Britain. In 1923, H. Dennis Bradley, a British writer, met George Valiantine, an American medium. Bradley was visiting the United States and attended his first séance in the New Jersey home of an acquaintance. Valiantine was the first medium Bradley encountered and the writer described him as “a very ordinary provincial American, simple and clean in person and mind.”⁸⁴ Furthermore, Bradley wrote that the medium “is not able to express himself with any fluency...His speaking voice is that of the ordinary range and his accent pleasing, but nevertheless that of the uneducated American.”⁸⁵ These distinctions were important according to Bradley as when ‘Kokum,’ Valiantine’s Canadian Indian spirit guide arrived speaking French and broken English. The arrival was “dramatic. From somewhere near the ceiling comes the most powerful voice I have ever hear,” wrote Bradley, “His great, deep, bass voice possesses the room.”⁸⁶

⁸³ Denise Kimber Buell, “The Afterlife Is Not Dead: Spiritualism, Postcolonial Theory, and Early Christian Studies,” *Church History* 78, no. 4 (December 2009): 865.

⁸⁴ Herbert Dennis Bradley, *Towards the Stars*, Revised popular edition (London: T. Werner Laurie, 1924), 6.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*

⁸⁶ Bradley, 15.

Not in keeping with the beliefs of many readers of *Psychic News*, Al Batten, a fourth generation Spiritualist, did not necessarily agree that many spirit guides appeared as Indigenous American owing to the perception that they were higher evolved, more spiritual, or more in-tune with nature than others. Batten thought that:

It depends upon how one defines 'spiritual.' Indigenous peoples of North America did have spiritual practices centered on nature and the concept of a Great Spirit. Contrary to the perception, however, it must be acknowledged that any review of their history suggests they were not necessarily more spiritual than other human societies...Were they more spiritual in the time prior to the arrival of the Puritans, or after their introduction to Christianity?⁸⁷

Al Batten's grandfather, Henry Thomas Batten (HT to the Batten family) had a home circle that sat weekly in Bolton, England, and "at one point, a group of Cherokee Indians, Native American Indians, came into the circle, and provided them, with some advice." The circle members were not familiar with these spirits and on further investigation discovered they were from the Choctaw tribe. The spirits advised Batten's grandfather "to reconstruct his circle to replicate what they [the Choctaw tribe] did in their spiritual practices, and to bring white light into the circle rather than darkness."⁸⁸ According to Al Batten, after the Bolton home circle changed its circle formation, "things really started to happen, including manifestations and materializations."

Batten believed that the spirit guides who presented themselves as Indigenous American was "primarily a British concept, recognizing the British, at that time, had a great interest in the American West, the romanticized Hollywood concept," and Batten, "had not noticed a similar influence in North America."⁸⁹ However, North America had its share of Indigenous American spirit guides. As

⁸⁷ Batten, Interview with Al Batten.

⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁹ Ibid.

we have seen earlier in this chapter, Powhatan and Black Hawk frequented séance rooms in the United States. Séance rooms in Canada, arguably as an extension of the British concept described by Batten, were also a site of reappearance of Indigenous Americans. From 1924 until his passing in 1966, British-born medium Thomas Lacey was often the channel for a variety of racialized spirits as he conducted séances in Kitchener and Hamilton, Ontario, Canada. Séance records show that Lacey's principal spirit guide in 1924 was a Hindu by the name of Abudha Khan.⁹⁰ This guide is purported to have lived in a temple in the Himalayan mountains and was familiar with the teachings of Jesus Christ.⁹¹ Walter, the spirit of Thomas Lacey's younger brother who had died at age seven, was the "doorkeeper" to the séances and was in control of which spirits would come through and speak to the home circle. Walter was often accompanied by the spirit of 'Violet' who was described as "an Indian guide who is usually very entertaining."⁹² In a 1933 séance, the racialized spirit of 'Sambo' appeared as follows:

Spirit: Yassa, Yassa. Sambo. That's me.

Sambo then appears walking into circle. Not easily recognized, although his face showed he was a negro.

Sambo: If the curtains were white you could see me better.⁹³

⁹⁰ Report of séance, May 2, 1931. GA 445-3. Thomas Lacey séance collection. University of Waterloo Library, Special Collections & Archives. This same séance also saw the appearance of the spirits of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, deceased for less than one year at the time, as well as the spirit of the conjuror, Maskelyne, who was a debunker of Spiritualism whilst alive, and was now working as, and with, spirit on the Other Side.

⁹¹ Stanley Edward McMullin, *Anatomy of a Séance: A History of Spirit Communication in Central Canada*, McGill-Queen's Studies in the History of Religion 28 (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2004), 162. The location of the séance notes quoted here from July 1931, as well as the other Thomas Lacey séances quoted in McMullin's book, is unknown; those records are not held in the archives at the University of Waterloo Library.

⁹² Séance recording, December 13, 1960. GA 270-11_001b. Thomas Lacey séance collection. University of Waterloo Library. Special Collections & Archives.

⁹³ Report of a séance, January 14, 1933. GA 445-19. Thomas Lacey séance collection. University of Waterloo Library, Special Collections & Archives.

By the 1960s, Thomas Lacey's principal spirit guide had changed to 'Amirah,' an entity appearing to be of Eastern origin and by this time the séances were being recorded on tape. When channeling 'Amirah,' Lacey's voice became slow and the accent non-descript. An Indigenous American spirit named 'Happy Wolf' regularly visited the Lacey home circle as he was the spirit guide of Garnet Schultz, one of the regular séance sitters. In the séance that took place on May 29, 1962, the following exchange occurred:

Happy Wolf: Hi.

Garnet: Hello, Happy Wolf.

Happy Wolf: Me Happy Wolf here tonight also.

Garnet: Good. Good. How is everything, Happy Wolf?

Happy Wolf: All things good.

Garnet: Nice.

Happy Wolf: Me bring – me bring to squaw here. Me bring to squaw.

Otto: To you, Anne.

Anne: Yes?

Happy Wolf: Me bring White Lily to you. White Lily, she princess. She the chief daughter. She chief daughter. Princess White Lily.

Woman: White Lily.

Man: Oh, White Lily.

Woman: Yes, I see.

Otto: Indian princess to you?

Happy Wolf: Indian princess. She you guide. She you guide. White Lily.⁹⁴

This style of speech was commonplace in the séance room where Indigenous American spirit guides appeared. Clarice Bland stated that using this form of “mimicry to present voices of the colonised spirits during the discourse that they bestowed upon them, they unwittingly implicated themselves in the same cycle of Othering.”⁹⁵ Bland rightly posits that this mimicry is an appropriation of “the stereotypes they had created whilst elevating the Native Americans to positions of authority, by giving them control of their bodies and voices.”⁹⁶

Silver Birch, Maurice Barbanell’s Spirit Guide

We know that Silver Birch was not a “Red Indian.” The term “Red Indian” is an antiquated term that has fallen out of use today but was widely used in the early twentieth century. Today, “Native American,” “American Indian,” or “Indigenous American” have replaced “Red Indian.” The spirit guide told members of the Hannen Swaffer home circle that once he agreed to take on the mission of sharing the teachings of the evolved beings from the Other Side, “they found for me the spirit body of a Red Indian that was suitable to be my medium for transmitting the teachings which are given to me to impart.”⁹⁷ Similar to many of the readers of *Psychic News* whose letters were published by Maurice Barbanell, Silver Birch also believed the “Red Indian” to be a “superior race,”

⁹⁴ Séance recording, May 29, 1962. GA 270-8_001b. Thomas Lacey séance collection. University of Waterloo Library, Special Collections & Archives.

⁹⁵ Clarice Bland, “‘This Child of Nature’ Representations of Native American Spirits in English Seances.,” *Entremons: UPF Journal of World History*, no. 11 (October 2020): 136.

⁹⁶ Ibid., 136.

⁹⁷ Riva, *Light from Silver Birch*, 199.

yet acknowledged they were not “free from all imperfections or cruelties.” Silver Birch laid blame for this at the hands of the white man.⁹⁸ The guide continued:

The Red Indians made their contribution. Their ethics and morals were high. They had their appreciation of nature, an understanding of the spiritual laws, the desire to achieve brotherhood among themselves; but they had their faults.

They were masters of psychic laws, and understood their operation. They also had a greater knowledge of spiritual laws. Like everybody else who comes to our world, they were confronted with the law of cause and effect. They received compensation or made retribution for whatever had happened in earthly life.⁹⁹

Silver Birch is reported to have said that he was but “a voice crying out in the wilderness,” going on to add, “what does it matter who I am? Judge me by what I strive to do. If my few words, me earnestness, me determination, my mission among you, bring comfort or light to one who is struggling in darkness, then I am happy.”¹⁰⁰ This question of Silver Birch’s identity is admittedly confusing: sometimes he is “Red Indian,” sometimes not. Another time, when talking about the teachings he was sent to share, the spirit guide said that some people, “will object because it comes from one who is regarded as a savage by your cultured, Western world,” thus we clearly see a juxtaposition in the thinking that many spirit guides presented as Indigenous American owing to the wisdom they had achieved in their earth lives, compared with those who believed them to be

⁹⁸ Ibid., 199.

⁹⁹ Ibid., 199.

¹⁰⁰ Tony Ortzen, ed., *Silver Birch Companion*, Silver Birch Series (Oxshott, UK: Spiritual Truth Press, 1999), 19.

‘savages.’¹⁰¹ Silver Birch was “well named, for his teaching, high and pure in quality, [he] is like the slender glorious tree that stands above its fellows, looking out over their heads towards the Light.”¹⁰²

Spirit portraits of Indigenous American spirit guides often depicted them in Indigenous clothing, including a feathered head dress. One author reported that “this does not necessarily mean that the Guides are wearing an actual feather ‘war bonnet’! But that what looks like one to the psychic who ‘sees’ it, is actually the wide-streaming rays of the aura...”¹⁰³ Beyond the oil painting of Silver Birch by Marcel Pontin, the published record about Silver Birch provides nothing further about his representation as being of Indigenous American appearance, Yet, it is impossible to ignore “the colonial relationship of the Indian as a guide for the white man” when studying Maurice Barbanell’s long career alongside his spirit guide.¹⁰⁴ Although Spiritualists’ hold that one should come to their own conclusions about what they see or hear, it is further impossible to ignore the trope of the nature-loving and spiritual Indigenous spirit guide as has been experienced in séance rooms around the world since Modern Spiritualism began, especially as “spiritualists believed that native Americans’ spiritual authority was bound up with their connection to nature.”¹⁰⁵

The Subliminal Self and Subconscious Personalities

Did Maurice Barbanell really channel the teachings of an evolved spiritual entity known as Silver Birch for over sixty years? Or were the words that left Barbanell’s mouth during the weekly séances held in his modest London apartment his subconscious thoughts? Notions of the self and the subliminal or subconscious self have long been studied by men, and women, of science, philosophy,

¹⁰¹ Orzen, 27.

¹⁰² Margery Lawrence, *Ferry Over Jordan* (London: Robert Hale Limited, 1944), 77.

¹⁰³ Ibid.

¹⁰⁴ McGarry, *Ghosts of Futures Past*, 66.

¹⁰⁵ Thompson, “Henry Olcott’s Sensual Spirits: The American Indian as Spiritualist Spectacle,” 32.

psychiatry, and psychology. This “other” self is “a limited second, coexisting, extra series of ‘thoughts’, feelings, sensations, etc., which are (largely) differentiated from those of the normal waking mind of the individual.”¹⁰⁶ This is applicable to the parapsychological arena as people have tried to understand whether psychic phenomena including automatic writing stem from the subconscious mind of the receiver, or whether the source is an otherworldly personality.

Beginning in the nineteenth century psychiatrists in America began to understand that issues of the mind were due to changes in the physical body. “Mental disorders,” they thought, were the “result from an organic breakdown of the brain or some part of the nervous system.”¹⁰⁷ Neurologists, on the other hand, saw insanity as coming from a disturbed mental state, rather than from a physical cause. Cures for these issues did not deal with the mind of the patient. Rather, they were designed to aid the physical and included, “quinine tonics, bed rest, and rich diets.”¹⁰⁸ According to R. Lawrence Moore, these advances in science led scientists to either conclude that mediums were acting fraudulent or that mediumship was “a serious medical problem.”¹⁰⁹ These lines of thinking and belief contributed to the development of psychical research that was concerned “first and foremost with the investigation of alleged ‘supernormal’ powers of the human mind.”¹¹⁰

The Society of Psychical Research (SPR) was founded in England in 1882 by mostly Cambridge University-educated men and women. These founders included Edmund Gurney and Frederic Myers, two men who “doggedly attempted to bring psychical research into the recognized

¹⁰⁶ Morton Prince, *The Dissociation of a Personality: A Biographical Study in Abnormal Psychology* (New York: Longmans, Green and Co., 1906), 18.

¹⁰⁷ R. Laurence Moore, *In Search of White Crows: Spiritualism, Parapsychology, and American Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), 134.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 135.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 136.

¹¹⁰ Moore, *In Search of White Crows*, 136–37.

domain of experimental and theoretical psychology.”¹¹¹ Gurney, who died in 1888 aged forty-one from an overdose of chloroform, studied the effects of hypnotism. Gurney believed “that actions performed under hypnosis were not merely involuntary reflex responses to the hypnotist’s commands.” Gurney’s studies demonstrated that enough people, after being awakened from the hypnotic state, were able to remember what occurred. Hypnotism, for Gurney, “prompted behaviour at once conscious *and* reflex.”¹¹² Frederic Myers concurred with his friend’s findings about hypnotism and he “used hypnotism to help him unravel the intertwined components of the human personality and to trace the contours of what he labeled the ‘subliminal self’.”¹¹³ This concept “was all those stream of consciousness, taken together, that did not form part of one’s habitual consciousness. However hidden, it was as fully aware of itself (hence conscious) as that self controlling most of our normal waking behavior.”¹¹⁴ Frederic Myers’ work on the subliminal self was published in the journal of the SPR and he soon became known as having “done more than anyone else to tie psychical research to the developing interest in submerged and unknown areas of consciousness.”¹¹⁵

Religious scholar Ann Taves wrote about Myers’ and French psychologist Pierre Janet’s work on the subliminal self, as well as the secondary self, in comparison with the work of William James. James was a noted “psychologist, a philosopher, and a metaphysician at a time when those roles were not always sharply distinguished.”¹¹⁶ According to Taves, James made a discovery of “consciousness beyond the field” that had not received appropriate attention within the study of

¹¹¹ Oppenheim, *The Other World*, 249.

¹¹² *Ibid.*, 250.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, 254.

¹¹⁴ Moore, *In Search of White Crows*, 149.

¹¹⁵ Moore, 149.

¹¹⁶ Ann Taves, “Religious Experience and the Divisible Self: William James (and Frederic Myers) as Theorist(s) of Religion,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 71, no. 2 (June 2003): 306.

religion. Taves suggested that James “was referring to the discovery of simultaneously coexistent states of consciousness, referred to by Janet and Myers as ‘secondary selves,’ as opposed to alternating (i.e., noncoexistent) personalities.”¹¹⁷ Ann Taves that “consciousness is divisible” and for James this meant that it could be split off or parts of it dissociated leading to the idea that “chains of bodily memories, if sufficiently extensive and elaborate, could in turn constitute distinct selves or personalities.” In summary, a primary and a secondary self could coexist in one body.¹¹⁸ Janet, Myers, Gurney, and James did not all agree on how a splitting of consciousness would occur. For Janet, this was because of hysteria, whereas the others “believed that secondary centers of consciousness could exist in healthy persons.”¹¹⁹

For Frederic Myers, the subliminal self, or what he used to call the secondary self, was an aggregate of potential personalities, fissiparous in nature, that could come and go. Myers “rejected what he thought of as old-fashioned claims to a unitary self or consciousness and posited instead the ‘composite or ‘colonial’ character’ of the human psyche.”¹²⁰ Further, Myers believed in “the possibility that supranormal phenomena such as ecstasy and genius might manifest through the subliminal self,” but he did not believe these were purely pathological occurrences.¹²¹ William James built on Myers’s theory “to explain how the claims of the religious genius to have been ‘moved by an external power’ could be literally and objectively true for both the scientist and the believer.”¹²² James did not deny that there could be a higher power operating outside of the human mind. However, he mostly believed that these occurrences came from within the mind itself. Whereas

¹¹⁷ Ibid., 307.

¹¹⁸ Ibid., 310.

¹¹⁹ Ibid., 311.

¹²⁰ Alex Owen, *The Place of Enchantment: British Occultism and the Culture of the Modern* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 174.

¹²¹ Ibid., 317.

¹²² Taves, “Religious Experience and the Divisible Self,” 317.

Myers “argued that the subliminal could represent the articulation of supremely spiritual and creative powers.”¹²³

How do the lines of study around subliminal selves relate when we consider Maurice Barbanell and his spirit guide, Silver Birch? Barbanell was aware of the doubts some people held about the veracity of mediumship, including his own. Yet he was “satisfied that Silver Birch is not, as some psychic researchers might state, a secondary personality.” Barbanell was adamant that his spirit guide had “a complete individuality of his own,” but admitted that owing to the medium being a living being, it was possible that the messages being delivered from the spirit guide could be coloured by the mind of the medium.¹²⁴ Barbanell stated, however, that “development consists in obtaining mastery over the subconscious mind,” thus claiming that the medium, over time, has the power to remove their ego from the process of message giving to ensure it is truly from the spirit world.¹²⁵

Not surprisingly Maurice Barbanell gave examples of the differences in thinking and belief between himself and Silver Birch. As an editor, Barbanell was accustomed to using words every day to create the stories that appeared in *Psychic News* and his books. He was seldom happy, however, with the results of whatever he had written or dictated. He was certain that he could better his work, “by altering words, phrases and sentences.”¹²⁶ Concerning Silver Birch’s orations, the medium wrote that “no such problems arise with the guide’s teachings. These flow perfectly, requiring usually only commas, semi-colons, or full-stops.” The language his guide used, according to Barbanell, also differed from his own, with the spirit guide using words that his medium did not. These claims were supported by Roy Stemman:

¹²³ Owen, *The Place of Enchantment*, 176.

¹²⁴ Maurice Barbanell, *Spiritualism Today* (London: Jenkins, 1969), 118.

¹²⁵ Maurice Barbanell, “His six-month quest that spanned six decades,” *Psychic News*, July 25, 1981, 5.

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*, 5.

...what impressed me most about the difference in him [Maurice Barbanell] as a person, as the editor, as a businessman and Silver Birch, when he was channelling Silver Birch, was Silver Birch's eloquence, the flow of his thoughts. There was no hesitation. He would be asked questions, there was no prearrangement which questions he would be asked. You could ask him anything and Silver Birch would begin to answer, and it would just flow.¹²⁷

Working alongside Maurice Barbanell for several years in the *Psychic News* office, Stemman knew firsthand that his boss preferred to dictate his letters and stories rather than write them out. According to Stemman, Barbanell would look out of the window of his office as he dictated his words to his secretary, Betty Macintosh, as she "sat there with her notebook and pen, waiting for the next words to come out." Oftentimes Barbanell would be struggling to find the words he needed and asked Macintosh to remind him what he had just dictated. "It was a painful experience to watch him dictating his editorial or a story," said Stemman. Barbanell had an open-door policy and was content for his staff to go in and out of the office to retrieve books from the office library. However, Stemman had to try and avoid catching the secretary's eye as "she was a very amusing lady. I would pick up the book I wanted, and I'd walk out." If Macintosh saw Stemman as their boss was struggling with his words, she would tell Barbanell, "For God's sake, spit it out!" This struggle to dictate easily was, for Roy Stemman, why it was amazing to hear the easy flow of words from Silver Birch.¹²⁸ In fact, when asked why he spoke using old words found in the Bible, Silver Birch replied, "I am an old soul and I like the old language best. I think it has more beauty. When you are striving to reach the highest that you know, then you find that in an atmosphere of beauty you obtain more peace."¹²⁹ The religion editor of a Canadian newspaper was fortunate to attend a Silver Birch séance in the 1960s. As Silver

¹²⁷ Stemman, Interview with Roy Stemman.

¹²⁸ Ibid.

¹²⁹ Tony Ortzen, ed., *The Spirit Speaks*, Silver Birch Series (Oxshott, UK: Spiritual Truth Press, 2009), 34.

Birch overtook Maurice Barbanell, the religion editor noted, “The change in Barbanell’s voice, diction and even his facial appearance is dramatic... To Spiritualists this metamorphosis is proof that he is truly possessed by a spirit being.”¹³⁰

Maurice Barbanell’s question about “The God Idea”¹³¹

Although it is impossible to determine whether Silver Birch was “real” or whether Maurice Barbanell was speaking from his subconscious mind during the séances, it is interesting to compare a lecture Barbanell gave in 1929 to the teachings of Silver Birch. Barbanell’s involvement with the Spiritualists’ National Union (SNU) is discussed in chapter one. Such was Barbanell’s involvement with the SNU that he was asked to read a paper at the third Annual SNU Summer School, which provided a “wide programme over a three-week period of studies, lectures, circles, private sittings and social.” The programme was open to SNU members at a cost.¹³² Writing about the invitation to speak, Maurice Barbanell noted:

When I was originally approached and asked whether I would speak at the Summer School, it was suggested that the subject be one which lent itself to controversy, and also one on which we could ask questions. This explains the title of my address; for surely of all questions that have puzzled thinking minds throughout the ages and is still unsolved, it is the great mystery we call God.¹³³

¹³⁰ “Canadian newspaper features Silver Birch and his medium,” *Psychic News*, July 1, 1967, 8.

¹³¹ Maurice Barbanell’s lecture, “The God Idea,” was published in the Spiritualists’ National Union journal, the *National Spiritualist*, across three issues: October, November, and December 1929. The author of this dissertation was unable to locate the October and November issues and will therefore cite the lecture’s reproduction in the SNU’s current publication, the *Pioneer Journal*.

¹³² Paul J. Gaunt, “What We Did before Stansted,” *Pioneer Journal* 2, no. 5 (September 2015): 146, <https://www.snu.org.uk/the-pioneer-journal>.

¹³³ Maurice Barbanell, “The God Idea,” *Pioneer Journal* 8, no. 4 (August 2021): 155.

The title of Barbanell's talk was "The God Idea."¹³⁴ As Barbanell stated in his introduction above, the paper would question man's idea of who, or what, God was. The subject selected should not be surprising given Barbanell's previously discussed thoughts about orthodox religion, but this time in relation to his spirit guide's teachings on God, religion, and prayer.

In "The God Idea," Maurice Barbanell stated that questions surrounding God were challenging to consider owing to an ever-changing idea of who God was, moving from the Old Testament with a God who was "very jealous and personal...who takes sides...is war-like, who sends pestilence and disease...and who is tyrannical," to the God of the New Testament "depicted as the loving Father of justice and mercy."¹³⁵ Answering the questions as to whether God exists, Barbanell wrote that, "the essence of the God idea is that God shall be greater than any definition, and so it must be realised that any definition of God could only be a crude attempt to express in language an idea greater than any language is capable of expressing."¹³⁶ When Silver Birch was asked to describe God, the spirit guide responded, "it is impossible to give you a complete picture. God is infinite. All language, concepts, and pictures must be finite."¹³⁷ Here we see a definite similarity between medium and spirit guide.

When tackling the question of a "personal God," Barbanell took issue with references to God as "He" or "Him," though he admitted to using those terms himself, Barbanell believed that "obviously perfection cannot be human and have a gender which is either masculine or feminine. This, of course, eliminates the idea of a personal God, unless one is willing to make personality so

¹³⁴ See Appendix B for the full lecture.

¹³⁵ Barbanell, 155.

¹³⁶ Ibid., 157.

¹³⁷ Stan A Ballard and Roger Green, eds., *The Silver Birch Book of Questions & Answers: A Useful Pocket Reference for Enquirers and Psychic Study Groups* (London: Spiritual Truth Press, 1998), 19.

elastic as to include the whole universe as the personality of God.”¹³⁸ Silver Birch, with thoughts similar to his medium, said that “there is no personal God apart from the one human beings have created,” going on to state that the Devil, Heaven, and Hell were “the imaginings of those whose views are limited.”¹³⁹

In his lecture, Barbanell was clear that he did not have an answer to the question that if “God created the universe and the laws in it, what was there before the creation, and if the universe is the effect of which God is the cause, what is the cause of which God is the effect? Or who created God?”¹⁴⁰ Silver Birch’s response to questions about the creation of the universe is vague, at best, and not therefore easily compared to Barbanell:

Life always was, life always will be...Your world has always existed. It had no beginning nor will it have an end...There were no creatures from outer space to create the beginnings of life in your world. Life was always there, and developed, unfolded and progressed according to the natural laws of evolution that infinite intelligence devised.¹⁴¹

Maurice Barbanell also asked, but did not answer, the question whether man was created by God or whether God is within us all, whereas Silver Birch provided contradictory responses at different times. “The Great Spirit has no existence apart from the totality of the Great Spirit which is manifested in all creation,” was the guide’s answer to the question whether the amount of God within each of us is the same as anywhere else.¹⁴² Yet, another time, Silver Birch said that “You are the Great Spirit, each one of you. His infinite power is latent within you.”¹⁴³

¹³⁸ Barbanell, “The God Idea,” 158.

¹³⁹ Ballard and Green, *The Silver Birch Book of Questions & Answers*, 20.

¹⁴⁰ Barbanell, “The God Idea,” 158.

¹⁴¹ Ballard, Barbanell, and Green, *The Silver Birch Book of Questions & Answers*, 44-45.

¹⁴² Ballard and Green, *The Silver Birch Book of Questions & Answers*, 19.

¹⁴³ Tony Ortzen, ed., *A Voice in the Wilderness: Further Teachings of Silver Birch*, Silver Birch Series (Oxshott, UK: Spiritual Truth, 2000), 51.

The next question on Maurice Barbanell's platform about the "God Idea" was whether there would be no happiness if there was no pain and suffering. The medium questioned the suffering of children asking, "why is it necessary for suffering to be inherited through the misdeeds of parents?"¹⁴⁴ Barbanell also questioned the suffering caused by natural events such as "earthquakes, tempests, tornadoes, whirlpools, icebergs, etc.," noting that as these events were not man-made who caused them to occur? In response to being asked if the Great Spirit was responsible for earthquakes, Silver Birch said that the "Great Spirit is the Law – the Law that controls all things. The Law governs all things," here stating that it is the Law of Nature that was responsible for these natural disasters.¹⁴⁵

Next, Barbanell returned to the suffering "produced by human action" and "if we are brutal, tyrannous, bullying with evil in our hearts, God made us so." Silver Birch believed that suffering was an important part of our journey in life on earth. Once, the spirit guide told a movie star whose fiancé had perished in an aeroplane crash, "You are very brave, but knowledge will help you. Try to appreciate that it is only through sorrow and suffering that you can acquire the greatest knowledge and the greatest understanding."¹⁴⁶ Silver Birch was clear that it was not the responsibility of spirit guides to prevent or alleviate suffering, but "the hardest part of our task is when we have to stand by, sometimes, and see you suffer. We know we must not help, because it is a battle of your own spirit... Sometimes I have wept tears because I have seen suffering, and knew I must not help. That is the law. It has hurt me more than it has hurt the sufferer."¹⁴⁷ Again, Barbanell is asking the questions but not providing any answers that would lead one to consider that Silver Birch was speaking from his medium's subconscious mind.

¹⁴⁴ Barbanell, "The God Idea," 159.

¹⁴⁵ Austen, *Teachings of Silver Birch*, 72.

¹⁴⁶ Ortzen, *The Spirit Speaks*, 45.

¹⁴⁷ A.W. Austen, "Kill All These Spiritualists! A Guide Gives The Perfect Reply," *Psychic News*, February 17, 1934, 1.

Lastly, Maurice Barbanell questioned the utility of prayer. “Have prayers any value at all apart from the spiritual exercise and is there any point reminding God of all the things, which, as God, He should know; and further, since 90% of prayer is generally personal request, is it not really a waste of breath?” he asked.¹⁴⁸ The importance of prayer, according to Silver Birch, was dependent on the prayer itself. The guide said that “the aimless repetition of words merely creates ripples in the atmosphere.” For a prayer to produce results, Silver Birch said that it needed to have true meaning and that it was important to be “praying with the soul and mind, with an earnest desire to reach out to the highest the soul can attain.”¹⁴⁹ The *Lord’s Prayer* did not escape Barbanell’s critical mind as being something that “when examined in the light of reason is illogical.”¹⁵⁰ He lectured that God must be more than a Father, he asked why His name should need hallowing, and he stated that asking for daily bread was futile. Man had to acquire bread through his own work. Barbanell claimed it was futile asking for our trespasses to be forgiven and that “forgiveness can never cancel out sin.” For Barbanell, it was absurd to ask God not to lead man into temptation, this is something that God would never do. Silver Birch agreed with this when he stated, “There is no spirit that leads you into temptation. You do that of your own accord.”¹⁵¹

Maurice Barbanell ultimately did not have an affirmative response to the questions of who, or what, is God. “It might be true that we never shall understand God,” wrote Barbanell, “because the lesser cannot understand the greater, but we must persist in the attempt.”¹⁵² Stating that it was the human mind that was divine, the medium stressed the importance of continuing to ask “how, why,

¹⁴⁸ Barbanell, “The God Idea,” 160.

¹⁴⁹ Austen, *Teachings of Silver Birch*, 76.

¹⁵⁰ Barbanell, “The God Idea,” 160.

¹⁵¹ Ortzen, *The Spirit Speaks*, 114.

¹⁵² Barbanell, “The God Idea,” 161.

where and what,” a sentiment that clearly followed him throughout his life and career as demonstrated through this review of his life and work.

In summary, it is evident that spirit guides are problematic. We have seen how they present themselves with a particular racialized identity and we have discussed whether it is the medium’s subconscious mind that is producing the communication from the spirit world. Yet, “guides are not very prone to talking about themselves,” which makes it difficult for the researcher to ascertain who they are and where they come from.¹⁵³ There is a great need for trust in the medium and what they are communicating about their spirit guide, as the guide is unique to them. Was it merely fashionable to work with a spirit guide who, for example, presented themselves as Indigenous American? Did this presentation lend credence to the messages being shared? Further studies into the origins of spirit guides are encouraged and it would be interesting to explore who today’s spirit guides are.

Likewise, it is not possible to know whether Silver Birch was from Barbanell’s subconscious mind or whether the guide was an independent entity. It is clear from discussion in this chapter that, although there were similarities between the medium and his spirit guide, one might be inclined to consider seriously the thoughts of those who knew Barbanell. Friends and colleagues testified that they were satisfied that the editor was indeed channelling the wisdom of an otherworldly entity. Ultimately, the reader should arrive at their own conclusion after studying the evidence, just as Spiritualism encourages those conducting their own inquiries into the religion and its related phenomena. Moving into the next chapter, we shall discuss Maurice Barbanell’s death, or promotion as he would have called it, and what, if any, legacy Barbanell, and Silver Birch left us.

¹⁵³ Howard Rodway, *The Psychic Directory* (London: Futura, 1984), 47.

Conclusion

Do not grieve for those to whom freedom has come. Do not mourn because the caterpillar has become a beautiful butterfly. Do not weep because the cage has been opened and the bird has been set free. Rejoice, and know that the enfranchised soul has found liberty and that, if you would but unfold the powers that the Great Spirit has given you, you could share some of the new beauty and joy which is theirs. You could understand the plan of death and realise that death is but a stepping stone, a door through which you enter into the larger freedom of the realms of the spirit.

Silver Birch¹

July 17, 1981, Maurice Barbanell, aged 79, “slumped back into his pillow and began his new life in the spirit world” following a heart attack, his wife, Sylvia, at his side.² Tony Ortzen, assistant editor of *Psychic News*, reported that Barbanell has been feeling unwell for some weeks after returning from his Spanish vacation with his wife. More concerned with the newspaper, Maurice Barbanell refused to go to the hospital, preferring to rest in bed in his North London apartment, only to be pronounced “medically dead” after the emergency services attended to him following his collapse that Friday evening.³ News of Barbanell’s passing, or promotion to spirit, only made the pages of one of the United Kingdom’s daily newspapers, the *Daily Telegraph*. The obituary was simple: “Maurice Barbanell. In London, aged 79. Founder and editor since 1932 of *Psychic News*, the spiritualist paper.”⁴ However, the pages of *Psychic News* were filled with tributes to the newspaper’s former editor,

¹ Silver Birch and Tony Ortzen, *Silver Birch Companion* (Oxshott, UK: Spiritual Truth Press, 1999), 33.

² Tony Ortzen, “Maurice Barbanell passes. His spirit promotion comes after 61 years of pioneering Spiritualism,” *Psychic News*, July 25, 1981, 1.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Obituary for Maurice Barbanell, *Daily Telegraph*, July 28, 1981, 10.

seemingly documenting Barbanell's legacy as a propagandist of Spiritualism following his sixty-one-year involvement with the movement.

The Spiritualists' National Union President, Gordon Higginson, commented, "For a while, one of the great lights in Spiritualism has gone out. Some day in the future, it will light again."⁵ Spiritual healer and director of Psychic Press, M. H. Tester, "entranced he was the greatest living trance medium I have met. Through him, Silver Birch gave the world a clear-cut and spiritually pure philosophy...Barbie, we will miss you. Please make contact with us."⁶ Hunter Mackintosh, President of the Spiritualist Association of Great Britain said, "it is indeed true to say that nobody in this century has contributed more to spreading the knowledge of Survival and advancing the cause of Spiritualism more than Barbie."⁷ The celebration of Barbanell's life and his work in and for Spiritualism continued in the following edition of *Psychic News* after Barbanell's passing was announced.

Roy Stemman, Barbanell's assistant editor at *Psychic News* for eight years, wrote that "Barbie was a campaigning journalist – a rare breed these days. But he was a Spiritualist first and an editor second. He made news as well as reported it."⁸ Eileen Hambling, a spiritual healer, knew Maurice Barbanell for forty-eight-years and as far as Spiritualism was concerned, she commented that the movement had become "accepted and respected the world over" thanks to her former friend and colleague's "intensive efforts." In typical Spiritualist fashion, Hambling wrote, "Though we feel sorrow at our loss, we rejoice that he

⁵ "Tributes to Maurice Barbanell pour in," *Psychic News*, July 25, 1981, 3.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Roy Stemman, "This final deadline was a surprise but --," *Psychic News*, August 1, 1981, 4.

is united with his beloved guide, Silver Birch, whose teachings and wisdom have guided and encouraged so many in lands near and far.”⁹ Indeed, Silver Birch once said that “death is not tragedy to those who die; it is only a tragedy to those who are left behind...If you grieve, you are in reality grieving over your loss and not for one who has in truth become enfranchised.”¹⁰ However, Spiritualists are still people who experience human emotions, especially when a loved one dies. *Psychic News* reporter Stella Storm struggled to write about Barbanell in the third person or past tense, as her former editor was “anything but the latter, but it’s going to be difficult to adjust to the fact that you have ‘died’ – and I use this taboo word deliberately, rather than ‘passed on’ or ‘been promoted.’”¹¹

By his wishes, Maurice Barbanell was cremated in a private ceremony attended by family and close friends, and of course, his wife of almost fifty years, Sylvia. The service was led by Vernon Moore, the ex-Methodist minister and long-time Hannen Swaffer home circle member. Moore, not unlike the comments made to *Psychic News* above, said during the service: “We have not met to grieve, but rather to rejoice that Barbie has gained access to a greater life. We have no uncontrolled grief because we know that death is liberation. It is a step in the divine order of eternal progression.”¹² In his tribute to a man he called a friend, Vernon Moore told the gathering at Barbanell’s funeral that “we meet in fellowship to congratulate Barbie on his accession to an infinitely richer life; we also meet to pay tribute to

⁹ Eileen Hambling, “He won freedom now we enjoy,” *Psychic News*, August 1, 1981, 4.

¹⁰ Stan A Ballard, Maurice Barbanell, and Roger Green, *The Silver Birch Book of Questions & Answers: A Useful Pocket Reference for Enquirers and Psychic Study Groups* (London: Spiritual Truth Press, 1998), 115.

¹¹ Stella Storm, “His promotion is only a ‘temporary adieu,’” *Psychic News*, August 1, 1981, 4.

¹² “The body is dead: the spirit lives on,” *Psychic News*, August 1, 1981, 1.

a most unique life of service.”¹³ Moore also commented that a man of such gifts as Barbanell possessed would have been wealthy had he pursued a business career, “Barbie was not a rich man. His riches were the riches of the spirit, his rewards people whose lives were transformed by knowledge.”¹⁴

The testimonies published after his death demonstrate that Maurice Barbanell was respected, loved, and admired by his friends and colleagues. A memorial meeting for Barbanell took place on October 24, 1981, at Friends House, the spiritual home of the Quakers, in London. The Spiritual Truth Foundation (STF) received the money raised by selling tickets to the memorial for £1.00. Maurice Barbanell founded the STF on February 15, 1968. The Foundation is still operating, and “its charitable purposes include the promotion of the religious philosophy of Spiritualism, the promotion and advancement of spiritual healing, and the making of grants to Spiritualists who are experiencing financial hardship.”¹⁵ Barbanell’s legacy of supporting spiritualism has continued long after his passing, and the Foundation has granted over £35,000 to spiritualists in need since 2018.¹⁶ The 1,200 attendees at the memorial were not only able to celebrate the life and work of Maurice Barbanell, but they also experienced a public demonstration of mediumship through “two most brilliant mediums”: Gordon Higginson and Joe Benjamin.¹⁷ *Psychic News* reported that “all the 1,200 tickets were sold within weeks,” and “hundreds of applications

¹³ “Friend conducts cremation service,” *Psychic News*, August 1, 1981, 8.

¹⁴ Ibid. Maurice Barbanell’s probate records show he left £45,090 at his passing which would be £165,443.13 in 2023, which is arguably not an insignificant sum for a man who lived a modest life.

¹⁵ “About STF,” Spiritual Truth Foundation, accessed July 28, 2023.

<https://www.spiritualtruthfoundation.org/about-stf/>.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ “Maurice Barbanell memorial meeting venue is arranged,” *Psychic News*, August 22, 1981, 3.

were returned.”¹⁸ People travelled from across the United Kingdom to attend the farewell to Barbanell and from countries including Switzerland and Spain.¹⁹ M. H. Tester, spiritual healer, Psychic Press director, paid tribute to his close friend at the event, saying, “Maurice Barbanell was a great man. He moved, wrote and lived at one level, but to many he existed at a much higher plane.”²⁰ Tester ended his tribute, “Barbie, you were told to spend your life spreading spiritual truth. Every man and woman here today will, I know, join me in saying, ‘Barbie, you have succeeded.’”²¹

Barbanell’s spirit communications

Was Maurice Barbanell’s earthly death the last the world would hear from him? The answer is no. Between his death and his cremation, Barbanell was reported to have made his “first spirit return” through the mediumship of Gordon Higginson, commenting on “changes made to his office since his promotion.”²² Higginson informed the *Psychic News* reporter that Barbanell had “visited” his office and commented on plants being present. The editor always enjoyed fresh-cut flowers in his office but never had a plant. Now, in the short time since Barbanell died, four plants had been placed in the former editor’s office. Gordon Higginson continued to inform the reporter that Maurice Barbanell did not think that the chest infection he suffered from during his last days would lead to his death. Furthermore, Barbanell had “plans to communicate via various mediums with whom sittings will be held.”²³ Two of

¹⁸ “Packed memorial meeting salutes ‘Mr Spiritualism,’” *Psychic News*, October 31, 1981, 1.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ M. H. Tester, “Editor was ‘haven in storm of materialism’” *Psychic News*, October 31, 1981, 1.

²¹ Ibid.

²² *Psychic News Reporter*, “Maurice Barbanell makes a speedy seance return,” *Psychic News*, August 1, 1981, 1.

²³ Ibid.

these series of afterlife communications by Maurice Barbanell are worthy of comment owing to their somewhat dubious nature.

Paul Beard, President of the College of Psychic Studies, maintained a thirty-five-year friendship with Maurice Barbanell. So close were the two men that, according to Beard, they had agreed “that whoever died first would try to describe the true nature of experiences met with subsequently.”²⁴ What happened next was a series of thirty sittings between 1982 and 1986, with a medium called Marie Cherie, during which Beard communicated with the spirit of Maurice Barbanell. Edited versions of these sittings were published in the *Barbanell Report* in 1987. During the last few sessions, Maurice Barbanell expressed concerns over Sylvia's health, saying, “Sylvia has withdrawn. She, too, is meditating. Also, I am worried about the link between the spirit and the physical; Sylvia is becoming very weak...Confusion is setting in...I wish she had been spared it also for in the past she had such common sense.”²⁵ Barbanell, during his earthly life, believed that “love, like life, is imperishable. Death cannot separate those who are joined in love...If there is love, there can be no parting.”²⁶ Similarly, Silver Birch said that “if there is not love, then there is no tie, there is no association, for on the spiritual plane love is the guiding principle.”²⁷ Both the medium and guide are saying that after passing on, only those who held sincere love for each other on earth will be reunited on the other side. As these communications reported by Paul Beard occurred before Sylvia

²⁴ Maurice Barbanell, Marie Cherie, and Paul Beard, *The Barbanell Report* (Tasburgh, England: Pilgrim Books, 1987), 2.

²⁵ Ibid. 122 - 123.

²⁶ Maurice Barbanell, *Power of the Spirit* (London: Psychic Press, Ltd., 1949), 14.

²⁷ Ballard, Barbanell, and Green, *The Silver Birch Book of Questions & Answers*, 114.

passed away in 1994, it is not known if she was reunited with her husband, especially as Barbanell is reported to have said that he had to:

alter my way of thinking and feeling about Sylvia...In doing so it seems I would be breaking certain ties, or binds that tie me to one way of thinking...we are not two people closely bound together but two individuals with their own soul's path to go and that I mustn't interfere but accept this pattern. It's as if I'm transported back to the period before we knew each other."²⁸

During another sitting, one of the last, Barbanell recounted his experience of death and crossing over. "There was a sense of sinking," he said, "a feeling of bright light and I used this word deliberately, I couldn't see it but I felt it."²⁹ Barbanell felt he was rising at the same time as sinking and was "conscious of some people clustered around the bed, and the sensation was similar to feelings one had when you received gas in the old days to get your teeth out."³⁰ He further stated that he felt no pain on passing over and was not surprised that it was happening, "it was as if the other me knew it was taking place and immediately took over when the process started."³¹ According to the editor, he was met by his mother and another family member but was disappointed that Silver Birch was not there during his transition to the afterlife.³²

²⁸ Barbanell, Cherrie, and Beard, *The Barbanell Report*, 134.

²⁹ Ibid, 146.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid. 147.

³² For an illuminating description of what happened at his time of passing, including meeting deceased friend and relatives, how hundreds of souls transitioned at the same time and the seeming chaos they felt, to the buildings such as hospitals that met them on the other side, see Stead, W. T. (William Thomas), Pardoe. Woodman, Estelle W. Stead, and Estelle W. (Estelle Wilson) Stead. *The Blue Island* (Los Angeles: Austin Publishing, 1930) for the experiences of life after death that followed the sinking of the Titanic.

The *Barbanell Report* was received with criticism. Tony Ortzen, now the editor of *Psychic News*, not unlike his former boss, was quick to publish his thoughts on Paul Beard's book. Having worked with Barbanell for almost ten years, Ortzen believed that "because of our close working relationship, I think I can claim to know Maurice Barbanell better than those who merely knew him as an acquaintance."³³ Ortzen took issue with reports that Barbanell referred to the healer Harry Edwards as 'Harry' when he always called him 'Henry' and that he called Silver Birch 'Old Gentlemen' and other terms during the sittings, terms that were not used during Barbanell's earthly life. Furthermore, in the sitting on June 5, 1985, Barbanell referred to Sir. Arthur Conan Doyle as "C. D."³⁴ "This Maurice Barbanell *never* did on earth," stated Ortzen. "I well recall one occasion when he reprimanded me for calling Sir Arthur 'Conan Doyle' in a headline," Barbanell clearly said, "His surname is Doyle."³⁵ Tony Ortzen also rebuked the claims that Barbanell was prepared for his death. As a well-organized man, Maurice Barbanell "would have made arrangements, especially concerning PN (*Psychic News*), for which he lived and breathed. But none was made."³⁶

Tony Ortzen had learned well from his predecessor as he challenged both Paul Beard and Marie Cherie "to relay six evidential comments from Maurice Barbanell concerning me or staff members he knew...For is Maurice Barbanell was still in earth and this book concerned someone else, his first comment would be 'What is the evidence?'"³⁷ Paul Beard

³³ Tony Ortzen, "'Barbanell report' set to cause controversy," *Psychic News*, September 5, 1987, 4.

³⁴ Barbanell, Cherie, and Beard, *The Barbanell Report*, 75 – 76.

³⁵ Ortzen, "'Barbanell report.'" Italics belong to Ortzen.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Ibid.

rejected this challenge as being “impertinent.”³⁸ The *Barbanell Report*’s editor was given column space in *Psychic News* for a rebuttal of Ortzen’s comments. He asked why it mattered that Barbanell referred to friends by different names after his passing. Beard rejected the challenge laid out by Ortzen and claimed that “enough general evidence is already in the book for readers to accept or not as they will.”³⁹ “To me,” Beard wrote, “the book is completely suffused with the character of the inner Barbie I knew...The book, indeed, goes far deeper than the literal requirements Tony demands for it to convince him.”⁴⁰

The controversy over the *Barbanell Report* lasted for three more issues of *Psychic News*, with readers sending in their letters of support, or dismay, at the book. One reader “was not at all convinced that the communicator was, in fact, Mr Barbanell. After reading Mr Ortzen’s well argued case I am even less convinced.”⁴¹ Beard was once again given column space to respond to this reader, and he wrote that he was pleased that Tony Ortzen had reviewed the book and that, even if Beard disagreed, Ortzen “has every right to take the position he takes.”⁴² Beard took issue with Ortzen taking the role of “judge and jury” by issuing his challenge instead of simply remaining as a review of the book. Another reader contributed their thoughts on the matter in defence of Paul Beard, stating that “the impression with which I am left with after reading the ‘Barbanell Report’ is one of honesty.”⁴³ This reader was not concerned with the incorrect use of names from the other side but was more

³⁸ Paul Beard, “Editor’s ‘impertinent’ challenge rejected,” *Psychic News*, October 3, 1987, 3.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Fergus O’Connor, “Editor defended,” *Psychic News*, October 31, 1987, 3.

⁴² Paul Beard, “Point missed,” *Psychic News*, November 21, 1987, 3.

⁴³ W. H. Mackintosh, “It’s not proof but...” *Psychic News*, October 31, 1987, 3.

“influenced...by the sense of authenticity which pervades the book. This may not be conclusive proof of Barbie’s survival, but it certainly creates a strong probability in its favour.”⁴⁴ This confrontation between the two men seemingly ended in December 1987 when another reader of *Psychic News*, despite admiring Ortzen, Beard, and Cherrie, reprimanded those involved, stating that “it is somewhat disturbing, therefore, to observe the present altercation between them over the veracity” of the book.⁴⁵ This reader even had their suggestion of gathering a group of mediums together to “set up an independent tribunal...and put it fairly and squarely to the Other Side?” imploring Beard and Ortzen, “Come along, gentlemen, let’s get to the bottom of this one.”⁴⁶ Research has not shown that this particular suggestion was accepted.

Furthermore, little is known about the medium. Marie Cherrie, to whom Barbanell transmitted his communications. By 1999, Cherrie had retired to Cornwall, England, where she gave psychic readings from her home. As to her involvement in the *Barbanell Report*, the medium told a local newspaper that before his death, Barbanell had “sought a medium through whom he could report back from ‘the other side.’” Cherrie added that Barbanell “chose me because he knew I wouldn’t do him any favours. We didn’t particularly get on.”⁴⁷ This statement confirms that Cherrie and Barbanell were acquainted; however, was the medium able to draw on this and the wealth of information about Barbanell that was publicly

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Geoffrey Clarke, “Solution suggested,” *Psychic News*, December 12, 1987, 3.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Richard Shimell, “Psychic: Persuasion not exorcism is the answer to removal of spirits. Marie’s simple explanation to many a ghostly sighting,” *West Briton*, December 16, 1999, 32.

available and used during the sittings with Beard? However, Marie Cherrie never published a record of a response to the Barbanell Report controversy. Was this Maurice Barbanell communicating from the other side? As Paul Beard wrote: “It is for each reader to judge for himself its source and any degree of worth it has.”⁴⁸ However, others involved in Spiritualism who knew Barbanell or were familiar with his work shared Tony Ortzen’s doubts regarding the veracity of the communications received.⁴⁹

Maurice Barbanell’s communications through Gordon Higginson and Marie Cherrie were not the start and end of reports of his continued existence in the afterlife. *Psychic News* reported that Barbanell “made a startling spirit return” during a public demonstration of mediumship held at a Spiritualist Church in London, England, in 1993.⁵⁰ The front-page story gave relatively weak arguments that the spirit communicating was Barbanell stating that the spirit had been “concerned with books” and that his wife had “written poetry.”⁵¹ Considering the fallout that followed the *Barbanell Report*, it is somewhat surprising that the newspaper took such vague statements as proof that their former editor was spiritually present at this public demonstration.

In 2012, British-born materialization medium David Thompson was invited to visit California to hold three séances. During the séances, Thompson materialized spirit entities, including his leading spirit guide, William Caldwell, a young Cockney boy called Timmy, musician Louis Armstrong (who sang Hello Dolly and played the harmonica), as well as the

⁴⁸ Beard, “Editor’s ‘impertinent challenge.’”

⁴⁹ Private email message to author, December 10, 2022.

⁵⁰ “PN’s founder makes spirit return at Wimbledon,” *Psychic News*, March 27, 1993, 1.

⁵¹ Ibid.

British direct voice medium, Leslie Flint.⁵² It was during the second of the three California séances that Maurice Barbanell “briefly materialized.”⁵³ Barbanell informed the séance sitters that Silver Birch would materialize during this sitting. It was reported that:

There was a large whoosh sound as if the curtains of the cabinet were blown outward. A cold breeze was felt by many sitters. I and others got the impression that someone special had arrived. Silver Birch had materialized and he spoke briefly about the Great White Spirit from the center of the circle. He then sang an Indian incantation or chant (blessing?) and then left.”⁵⁴

David Thompson’s partner, Christine Morgan, informed her hosts that Silver Birch had appeared twice before, with a “whoosh sound and the breeze of cold air.”⁵⁵ Unfortunately, such as Barbanell’s appearance a decade earlier at the London Spiritualist Church, this report of the séance gave no firm evidence that he or Silver Birch was in attendance as reported. Another trance medium in Australia claimed to channel Maurice Barbanell. Roy Allen has shared talks given through him by Barbanell. However, the veracity of these communications is heavily doubted by those who knew Barbanell and the work of Silver Birch.⁵⁶

Surprisingly, Maurice Barbanell was labelled as an antisemite during an episode of a YouTube show, *Whitehouse UFO*, that was broadcast in 2020.⁵⁷ During the interview, Rev. Kevin Lee, a former nurse and current motivational speaker and coach, stated that he had

⁵² Jan W. Vandersande, “Three Materialization Seances with David Thompson.,” *Journal of Spirituality & Paranormal Studies* 35, no. 3 (n.d.): 136 – 140.

⁵³ Ibid, 141.

⁵⁴ Vandersande, “Three Materialization Seances with David Thompson.,” 141.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Insights from Spirit, “Maurice Barbanell,” accessed July 26, 2023, https://www.insightsfromspirit.com/maurice_barbanell.html. Doubts concerning the veracity of these talks in private email message to author, October 31, 2022.

⁵⁷ Grant Cameron Whitehouse UFO, “Grant Cameron on Mediums, Spirit Communication and Ectoplasm with Rev. Kevin Lee part 2,” YouTube Video, 1:13, March 6, 2020, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WA6o_Tstp3I.

been informed by spirits during séances that “if you do not like Native American Indians, we will not present to you a Native American Indian because we need your mind in the most receptive state to bring forward the information.”⁵⁸ Lee then uses Maurice Barbanell and Silver Birch as a “perfect example,” first incorrectly stating that Barbanell and Sylvia edited *Psychic News*. Then, Lee continues to note that Silver Birch said he was “Native American” for many years “but would drop hints that he was not Native American.”⁵⁹ This, as discussed in this dissertation, is another incorrect statement, as Silver Birch confirmed early on that he was not a “Red Indian.” Rev. Lee claimed, “It came out later that this consciousness speaking through Maurice Barbanell, who called himself Silver Birch, was actually a Jewish scholar in the spirit world.”⁶⁰ There is no supporting evidence of this claim in Silver Birch’s teachings. “Maurice Barbanell did not like Jews and he would never have allowed a Jewish spirit to speak through him. He was antisemitic.”⁶¹ These outrageous claims were challenged in the broadcast comments section, with one former editor of *Psychic News* asking for the source of the “serious allegation that he ‘did not like Jews.’ He was a Jew himself!”⁶² Another viewer commented that stating that Barbanell did not like Jews was “really offensive.” When questioned, Rev. Lee could not provide the evidence to support his comments.⁶³

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Susan Farrow, former editor of *Psychic News*, responding to Rev. Kevin Lee’s comments about Maurice Barbanell in the YouTube video.

⁶³ Private email message to author, November 2, 2022.

***Psychic News* after Maurice Barbanell**

Shortly after Barbanell's passing, the Psychic Press board appointed Tony Ortzen as the acting editor of the newspaper. Members of Ortzen's family were journalists, and he obtained his training as a journalist at a regional newspaper in England. This job promotion changed Ortzen's plans to emigrate to Adelaide, Australia, and he opted to remain in the United Kingdom.⁶⁴ By August 15, 1981, almost one month after the death of Maurice Barbanell, changes were happening at *Psychic News* as the front-page article announced that "PN this week begins a new era."⁶⁵ Tony Ortzen was now the editor and was featured in the front-page photograph sitting at his desk surrounded by some of the team working at *Psychic News*, the smile on his face suggesting a level of happiness with his new role. The newspaper even had a newly re-designed title. Despite all these changes, the newspaper was clear: "But our main message, our paramount task, is still to present to the world the Spiritualist message, its philosophy and evidence."⁶⁶ Despite the newspaper's statement that after having dedicated two issues to their former editor, they would only print "tributes from abroad or those which are exceptional" in future issues, they did not want to erase Barbanell's memory as beneath the new title they stated, "Founded in 1932 by Maurice Barbanell."⁶⁷

The newspaper that Maurice Barbanell founded in 1932 encountered challenging times in later years. Roy Stemman wrote that as Psychic Press Ltd experienced financial

⁶⁴ "Psychic Press Board names acting editor," *Psychic News*, August 1, 1981, 1.

⁶⁵ Tony Ortzen, "PN starts its new era," *Psychic News*, August 15, 1981, 1.

⁶⁶ Ortzen, "PN starts its new era."

⁶⁷ "Psychic Press Board names acting editor."

issues, they were supported by the Spiritual Truth Foundation until 1995 when the Foundation could not continue providing that level of support.⁶⁸ Stemman wrote that the STF had negotiated with The Spiritualists' National Union, and they agreed to "take over ownership of Psychic Press Ltd and its publishing and bookshop arms and relocate them at Stansted Hall - better known as The Arthur Findlay College, a large residential centre at which it runs various courses - to guarantee *Psychic News*' survival 'for the foreseeable future.'" ⁶⁹ The SNU ran the newspaper until 2010, and, owing to continued financial issues with the newspaper, they abruptly ceased publication of *Psychic News*. The newspaper remained out of print until it was purchased in 2011 by the J. V. Trust, and its publication continues, both in print and online, to this day.⁷⁰

Death is not the end.

It is difficult to imagine that a young boy who grew up in a family that held divergent views on religion would become Spiritualism's staunchest supporter. Yet, Maurice Barbanell was that boy. In his late teenage years, he agreed to investigate spiritualism, which led him to attend his first séances in east London. The young man, full of curiosity but with little belief in the religion, initially derided what he heard before falling into a trance. This was the

⁶⁸ Roy Stemman, "Death of Psychic News?" Paranormal Review, July 10, 2010, accessed July 28, 2023, <http://www.paranormalreview.com/articles/20100710>. Archived at <https://web.archive.org/web/20130403145520/http://www.paranormalreview.com/articles/20100710>.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ The JV Trust was founded by Roy and Christine Wandless in 1976 following the deaths of their two children, John and Valerie. "Its primary charitable object is the promotion, establishment, spread and advancement of the religion and religious philosophy known as Spiritualism with particular regard for the training of ministers. The promotion of spiritual healing, and the relief of aged and infirm Spiritualists in need of financial assistance, are further aspects of its mission." Sue Farrow, "The J. V. Trust. Spiritualism in Action," *Psychic News*, accessed July 28, 2023, <https://www.psychicnews.org.uk/articles/Spiritualism-in-action>.

beginning of his lengthy journey with this newfound religion and a partnership with his spirit guide, Silver Birch, that would endure for the rest of his life. This journey cost Barbanell dearly: his first marriage ended in divorce; he lost contact with his only child; his family distanced themselves from him, and he never met his sibling's children. Barbanell's niece, Lesley Brooks, never had the opportunity to meet her uncle, but she "would have loved to have spoken to him because what he did was fascinating."⁷¹ He did, however, meet the love of his life, Sylvia, and the two were married for almost fifty years.

Maurice Barbanell soon became a propagandist for Spiritualism, travelling across the United Kingdom alongside his friend, Hannen Swaffer, lecturing about the religion in front of thousands of people. Swaffer, a leading Fleet Street journalist and committed Spiritualist, ran the Hannen Swaffer home circle. In this weekly séance, Barbanell soon became the medium that channelled the wisdom of Silver Birch. By 1932, Barbanell had founded a leading Spiritualist newspaper, *Psychic News*, which he edited for most of his career. This platform was used to share Silver Birch's wisdom with its readers, yet Barbanell's identity as the spirit guide's medium was a well-kept secret for more than twenty years.

The editor was vocal in his support for and defence of Spiritualism, frequently using *Psychic News* as his podium to champion mediums he felt were wrongly accused of acting fraudulently. He also did not refrain from denouncing mediums he believed were acting fraudulently and subsequently became embroiled in several libel cases. Barbanell saw himself as both the plaintiff and defendant in several high-profile cases, sometimes against

⁷¹ Lesley Brooks, Interview with Lesley Brooks, interview by Nick Richbell, December 12, 2022.

prominent people, and he lost instances as much as he won them. However, losing never deterred Maurice Barbanell. Indeed, losing merely emboldened him to continue his fight for the movement; fights then even resulted in the man being physically attacked in the street.

Furthermore, his devotion to spiritualism made him unafraid to challenge organized religion, including the Church of England and the Archbishop of Canterbury's Committee on Spiritualism. The Committee met twelve times to consider the relationship between Spiritualism and the Church, yet the Report was not published for forty years. Barbanell accused the archbishop of suppressing the Report, claiming that it was favourable to Spiritualism, with Cosmo Lang stating that he never intended to make the Report public. The Report was leaked, and Maurice Barbanell claimed that his "greatest scoop" was making the Report publicly available, something the Church had refused to do.

Although the editor had failed in business in his early thirties, *Psychic News* succeeded. Although journalism did not come easy to Barbanell, and putting words on paper was challenging, he was also the author of fifteen books. He recounted stories of his journey through Spiritualism with his medium friends and colleagues, sometimes repeating the more noteworthy stories in subsequent books. Today, his books can be obtained from antiquarian booksellers, unlike the words of Silver Birch, whose legacy is still reprinted in book form from the Spiritual Truth Foundation that Maurice Barbanell created. He surely would be proud that his partnership with the spirit guide is still helping Spiritualists in need more than forty years after the duo's work ended with Barbanell's death.

Maurice Barbanell was labelled “Mr. Spiritualism” in a national newspaper strip cartoon, likely during the 1960s.⁷² According to Barbanell, the label was given to him because he was the “expert on the subject,” having edited the world’s most popular Spiritualist newspaper for forty years.⁷³ Barbanell, however, thought “this was going a bit too far.”⁷⁴ Talking about his former boss being a spokesperson for Spiritualism, Roy Stemman said that it was “other people that came to that conclusion because he was a very good speaker.”⁷⁵ Even though “he never called himself Mr. Spiritualism,” Stemman continued, “I’m sure he was quite pleased when he saw that description.”⁷⁶ Indeed, by 1979, only two years before his death, Maurice Barbanell had decided that Mr Spiritualism was his “favourite nickname.”⁷⁷ No matter how humble Maurice Barbanell was, there is no doubt that he was ‘Mr. Spiritualism.’ Before or after, no one worked as tirelessly as he did to promote Spiritualism’s claims that the soul lives on after death and that discarnate spirits communicate with the living. While Barbanell is well known for his long association with *Psychic News* and *Silver Birch*, this dissertation allows us to hear his voice again and remember aspects of his legacy that perhaps were unknown or have been forgotten. Maurice Barbanell’s legacy is probably summed up in his own words that speak to his life’s mission to promote and defend Spiritualism: “Ours is a simple truth and a simple message. Man

⁷² The strip cartoon has not been found. This reference is in “He’s Fleet Street’s ‘Mr Spiritualism’” *Psychic News*, September 25, 1971, 4.

⁷³ Maurice Barbanell, “Do the dead return?” *Liverpool Echo*, January 15, 1973, 6.

⁷⁴ Maurice Barbanell, “Is my face red?” *Psychic News*, December 21, 1974, 7.

⁷⁵ Roy Stemman, Interview with Roy Stemman., interview by Nick Richbell, October 27, 2022.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ Maurice Barbanell, “What’s in a name?” *Psychic News*, July 21, 1979, 4.

survives ‘death’ because he is spirit. Man lives because he is spirit. Properly understood, these simple facts will revolutionise the world.”⁷⁸

⁷⁸ Maurice Barbanell, “Plain Facts,” *Psychic News*, October 17, 1936, 6.

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Appendices

Church of England Press Release

Coggan papers, Vol 90. Lambeth Palace Library.

EMBARGOED UNTIL 00.01 HOURS ON THURSDAY, MARCH 1, 1979

Church Information Office

Church House, Dean's Yard, London, SW1P 3NZ Telephone 01-222 9011

SPIRITUAL UNVEILING – 40 YEARS ON

After forty years in wraps, a report on Christians and Spiritualism is unveiled today (Thursday, March 1). The dust has at last been disturbed – Lambeth Palace archives opened that is – to allow publication of findings that have been the centre of speculation for decades.

A section of the report was leaked to the Spiritualists in 1947 and they have kept this in print continuously ever since.

All ten men and women who sat on that pre-war committee, appointed in 1937, are now dead.

The report is out today in the quarterly *The Christian Parapsychologist*. One might well wonder what all the fuss has been about and why the lengthy embargo.

Why the secrecy then, for all these years?

What happened was this. Deep cleavages of opinion stuck out a mile as soon as the committee met. It was appointed to report to the Archbishop of Canterbury, Cosmo Lang, under the chairmanship of Bishop Francis Underhill of Bath and Wells, and asked to investigate 'communications with discarnate spirits and the claims of Spiritualists in relation to the Christian faith'.

Evelyn Underhill, the eminent mystical theologian, resigned after the first meeting because of the 'utterly sub-Christian, anthropocentric, hopelessly unsupernatural character of

the Spiritualist outlook. It is all about man, his survival, prospects, etc., hardly at all about God’.

In the end the committee divided. The majority – including Dean Matthews of St. Paul’s; Canon Harold Anson, Master of the Temple; and Professor L. W. Grensted of Oxford – although distinctly critical of some aspects of Spiritualism, decided that some of the evidence did support the theory of survival after death. And far from condemning those who claimed to be in contact with the departed, they believed their practices might ‘add a new immediacy and richness to their belief in the Communion of Saints’, and they didn’t want the Church to ‘regard this vital and personal enrichment of one of her central doctrines with disfavour’.

The minority – Guy Mayfield, Mildred Rawlinson, and W. S. Wigglesworth – didn’t believe the Spiritualist interpretation of the data and thought the alleged communications might be ‘misleading and therefore dangerous’.

So, with the very deep divisions, Archbishop Lang decided not to publish the 1939 report. With his death it fell, along with all his other papers, under the 40 year embargo controlling the Archbishop’s papers. And it has been kept in Lambeth archives ever since.

Now free from the 40 year rule, the full report is in today’s journal which is published by the inter-denominational Churches’ Fellowship for Psychical and Spiritual Studies of St. Mary Abchurch, London EC4N 7BA (01-626-0306). With it is comment by the Fellowship’s President, the Worshipful the Rev. Chancellor Garth Moore.

Of the long delay, he has this to say: “By the time the Committee produced its Report, the clouds of war were again breaking and it became impracticable to publish it. Among Spiritualists the rumour got round that the Report was unexpectedly favourable to their beliefs and the idea took root that, for this reason, it was being deliberately suppressed by the Church.

“It is true that the Report, though often critical, is in many respects favourable to spiritualist claims. It may well be that for this reason it caused unease to some with whom the Archbishop shared it.

“It is false to say that it was deliberately suppressed. By the time that Hitler’s war was over and publication was possible, the Report was Stale. It would, nevertheless, have been wiser to have published it then than to have invited the false accusation of suppression. But wisdom did not prevail, and some sections of the spiritualist press conducted a campaign against the Church on the ground of suppression.

“Eventually someone, whose identity has not been disclosed, leaked the contents of the Report, and, without any obvious regard for either morality or legality, a pirated copy of the findings of the majority of the Members of the Committee appeared and was widely circulated. Successive Archbishops still maintained the unwise silence”.

Archdeacon Michael Perry of Durham, who edits *The Christian Parapsychologist*, says he hope that publication will open up a new dialogue which will not be ‘characterised by the attitude of unremitting hostility to the Church which unhappily marks the still frequent references to this Report in some sections of the Spiritualist press’.

He goes on to say that he believes that the present Archbishop of Canterbury, Dr. Donald Coggan, would be doing Christians a service if he were to ask a group of theologians and psychical researchers, with wider terms of reference, to hold a watching brief on behalf of the Churches and report back from time to time.

The God Idea

The God Idea

A Paper read to the Summer School Students.

By M. Barbanell, Dipl. S. N. U.

Published in the *National Spiritualist*, No. 66. Vol. VI. December 1929.

When I was originally approached and asked whether I would speak at the Summer School, it was suggested that the subject be one which lent itself to controversy, and also one on which we could ask questions. This explains the title of my address; for surely of all questions that have puzzled thinking minds throughout the ages and is still unsolved, it is the great mystery we call God.

One of the difficulties in approaching this subject is due to the fact that man's idea of God has been subject to evolution, and the ideas that were accepted generations ago have become considerably modified, as undoubtedly will current conceptions in a generation hence, and it is still true to say that no matter how much ideas and conceptions may alter, God must of necessity remain the same, and unalterable.

In order to gain some idea of this constant evolution, one has only to take the Bible, and compare the conception of God depicted in the very early pages of the Old Testament, where we have delineated a very jealous and personal God, who takes sides, who is war-like, who sends pestilences and diseases, who exterminates lives, who incites wars, and bloodshed, and who is tyrannical.

Then we turn to the picture of God as revealed by Jesus in the New Testament, and the conception has become completely changed, and we have a God who is depicted as the loving Father of justice and mercy. One would be inclined to say that the two conceptions referred to two different Gods, yet they were both depicting the self-same idea.

Similarly we find that the modern conception of God has evolved, and so starting is the evolution, that were a modern preacher to have stood in a pulpit seventy years ago, and expressed ideas which modern Christianity now accepts he would without doubt have been denounced as a heretic. Bearing this in mind, one approaches the subject with great difficulty, realising this constant modification of ideas.

The first questions we have to ask ourselves are, Does God exist, and if so, what is God?

The answers are far more difficult than the questions. For the essence of the God idea is that God shall be greater than any definition, and so it must be realised that any definition of God could only be a crude attempt to express in language an idea greater than any language is capable of expressing.

Does God exist? Let us see. It is true to say that the last generation has witnessed a tremendous number of discoveries in all phases of scientific research, and as a result we have learnt a great deal concerning the universe which was hitherto considered mysterious and unknown. We have measured the stars, and the planets, and have even calculated their movements. We have delved into the earth, and wrested from her, secrets which have been buried for countless ages, which have enabled us to reconstruct pages of past history. We have discovered how to manipulate many of the vibrations of light and sound, and have invested apparatus to harness them for our requirements.

Yet in all fields of research, no matter what discovery has been made, behind every fact, new or old, is the question of law. Whatever happens does so because its happening is regulated by law, and this is true not only of the mightiest things in the universe, like tides and planets, but even of the humbler and lesser kingdom of microbes and insects.

Let us pause and consider. The movements of the tides are regulated by law, the stars and planets wheel in their courses, all by law. The sun rises and sets by law. The seasons follow each other by law. All growth, be it inanimate or animate, is subject to unalterable law, and so perfect are these laws, that they have been in operation now apparently for millions of years, working without a single mistake. Further, these laws never have to be modified or withdrawn or altered in any shape or form. Now the existence of law must postulate intelligence which creates the law, and sets the law in operation. Laws do not and cannot create themselves. If you throw a handful of type into the air a million times, it will never fall so as to make intelligent sentences. Not until you apply your own intelligence, which is external to the type, you will have sentences.

We too have laws, and in England we have laws which are considered to be the finest in the world. So much so that year by year Law students and lawyers visit our country in order to learn from us something of the standard of our laws. Yet we are always making fresh laws, we are always altering past laws, we are always repealing old laws that are now defunct and bad, and making new laws to meet new conditions. Although our laws are supposed to be the finest in the world, they are full of errors, and so liable to misinterpretation, that we have to have courts of law and barristers, solicitors, magistrates and lawyers, all of whom are

employed day by day to see that the law is properly interpreted and carried out. No one would ever say our laws are perfect.

We ask ourselves the question. Why the necessity for repealing old laws? And the answer is that the minds who made those laws were imperfect minds and so the result was imperfect laws, the imperfections of which the sequence of time has discovered. Yet on the other hand there are laws made centuries ago which are still in operation to-day because the minds which made those laws were greater minds. So we are forced to conclude the laws, the poorer the minds which conceived them.

If we compare man-made laws with natural laws and follow the same lines of reasoning, we are forced to admit that because the laws of the universe are perfect both in their operation and their administration that the mind which created and set them in operation must be equally as perfect. Hence in this somewhat round-about fashion we get some conception, however faint and obscure, of a perfect mind which exists behind the laws of the universe. Beyond that it is almost impossible to get definitions and ideas. We are in the habit of referring to God as "He" and "Him," yet the term is a bad one, although I shall be forced to use it. Obviously perfection cannot be human and have a gender which is either masculine or feminine. This, of course, eliminates the idea of a personal God, unless one is willing to make personality so elastic as to include the whole universe as the personality of God.

Having said all this, however, I must also say that there are many problems to be faced: problems to which it is impossible to give an immediate answer, and which are at present right beyond the range of human thought. It might be asked if God created the universe and the laws in it, what was there before the Creation, and if the universe is the effect of which God is the cause, what is the cause of which God is the effect? Or who created God? Or whether there was a series of Gods who created one another; I do not know. Whether there was anything in existence before the Universe, I do not know. We human beings are forced to conclude that we know nothing at all about the first causers whatsoever.

There are some, however, who will not conceive the idea of a perfect God at all, because they say that God essentially is a part of the Universe, and if this is so, and it can be admitted that the Universe is subject to evolution, they say that God must be subject to evolution too. An evolving God cannot possibly be a perfect God, as perfection surely would be the summit of evolution. Then, too, there are others who are puzzled and at a loss to understand the relation of God to Man, for, they say, "If God made man, and man is imperfect, then surely God must be imperfect too, otherwise we would have to admit that perfection produces imperfection, whereas one would have thought that the natural results of perfection would be perfect."

Were we created by God? Is it true that God is spirit and we are spirit too, and that in a lesser degree we are all potential gods, and that a stream of divinity, be it small, flows throughout all our natures? Is it true that we are parts of God, and the God is composed of the totality of all our parts, and that apart from us, God has no existence? Then, too, how are we to understand so much which seems illogical and unjust to us as being the suppose action of a perfect God who is perfect in wisdom and in love?

There are the great twin mysteries of Pain and Evil for which there has never been any satisfactory explanation. Perhaps you may believe that there is no explanation that we would understand at present, but if so, I must replay that we must strive to understand, however difficult and elusive the problem. The reason for our existence on earth is only justified in an attempt to unravel the mysteries of nature. Can we honestly say that all pain exists merely as a chastening effect from which the soul emerges more purified than it was before?

Are we satisfied to believe that Pain provides the comparative experience to happiness, and without experiencing it there could be no happiness. If so, how do we explain the fact that so many seem to receive a measure of pain that seems unjust in comparison with other lives? Then too, the apparent suffering of innocent and good living men and women who are subject to some of the worst diseases of humanity, sometimes inherited with their birth. It does not seem just that an innocent child should be forced to go through life suffering the results of its parents' wrong living. Of course I know I shall be told the answer is that the sins of the fathers shall be visited upon the children, that is the Law, but surely if we made the Law and if we had the power that apparently God had would we make unjust laws? The only other explanation is the belief that in the larger life after death, compensation can be offered and an adjustment made, but this still leaves unanswered the great question—Why is it necessary for suffering to be inherited through the misdeeds of parents?

Then, too, there are some who say that all the suffering in the Universe is not the action of God or natural law, but due to human beings. Here again one has to pause and remember that this does not explain earthquakes, tempests, tornadoes, whirlpools, icebergs, etc. all of which certainly are not man-made. I have heard this objection met with an answer that the suffering of a thousand people is no greater than the suffering of one, but this seems to me to be a very callous outlook, for surely we know as Spiritualists the effect that a sudden exit from life produces in the individual.

Then let us turn again to this question of suffering that is produced by human action, and let us see whether the responsibility altogether rests on human shoulders. We say God made us. If we are brutal, tyrannous, bullying with evil in our hearts, God made us so. Just as easily as he could have made us sweet natured, amiable and full of love, but rightly or

wrongly he chose to make us as we are. We were not consulted, we were not given a choice, and the responsibility for our organised being rests not upon us but upon God. And equally also surely the responsibility for our actions which are the results of our being, too, so that one could fasten all suffering and evil upon God as the intelligence who created us.

In passing, I have always wanted to know the opinion of Mr. Blatchford, who so very cogently advances this Determinist argument, since his acceptance of Spiritualism. There are some who are quite satisfied to believe the only answer is that one day we shall know all, and that at present we are merely trying to form hasty judgements from incomplete portions, but we must refuse to be placated with this argument, and press on and investigate until our reason is satisfied.

It is advanced in some quarters that we only have pain, evil and suffering because of the fact that we have been given free wills, but certainly it is true to say that our free will is far from free. It is so restricted and limited by laws and circumstances over which we have no control, that its freedom is in a measure almost, but not wholly, insignificant. One wonders sometimes, if it is not too blasphemous a thought, whether, if we were god, with the powers divinity possesses, we would create a race of beings such as we are today, or whether we would produce far different results.

Let us turn to the question of Prayer, and here we see also much of the illogicality of the human mind. Recently we had a drought, and the water supplies of our country were threatened. Immediately the suggestion was thrown out by the Church that we should have prayers for rain. Why? Is it suggested that a perfect God was unaware of the fact that there was a drought, and needed to be reminded of it by our supplication? Is so, this is a very curious state of perfection; and further, could our prayers influence or change the natural laws which determine rain and sunshine? Then again, we praise God for the Sun, for the flowers, but no-one blames God for the weeds. We praise God for all the beautiful things in life, but no-one blames God for the ugly, yet if God made one surely He is responsible for the other?

Have prayers any value at all apart from the spiritual exercise, and is there any point reminding God of all the things, which, as God, He should know; and further, since 90% of prayer is generally personal request, is it not really a waste of breath? One could enlarge on this a great deal, particularly by making reference to the invocations offered by Speakers on public platforms at Services, which would certainly be far better were no attempt made at prayer whatsoever. This reminds me that there is a tendency both in the Spiritualist movement and religious movements generally, to assume that it is only possible to make this contact with God in some place called a 'Church,' whereas, the idea is obviously contrary to the whole spirit of the nature of God.

God is love we are told, but God is Law, and often it is difficult to reconcile the two, but one thing remains steadfastly certain, no matter what our desires or requests may be, unalterable and immutable law control and reign the universe.

Sunday after Sunday we have repeated what is supposed to be the Model Prayer for all human beings, namely the Lord's Prayer, which when examined in the light of reason is illogical. God in order to be God must be something more than a Father, and must exist not only in Heaven. Why should God's name require hallowing? The will of God is law and it is already 'done on earth' for no man or woman has the power to interfere with the will of God.

It is useless praying to God for daily bread. It can only be obtained by our own efforts. It is vain asking God to forgive our trespasses. We know that our trespasses cannot be forgiven until we have put right that which we have made wrong. Forgiveness can never cancel out sin. Asking God not to lead us into temptation is surely absurd, for it is suggesting that a God who loves us would lead us into temptation. From evil we can only deliver ourselves. So I am afraid that the whole conception of the Lord's Prayer requires considerable modification in the light of our modern knowledge.

It might be true that we never shall understand God, because the lesser cannot understand the greater, but we must persist in the attempt. Mere worship and praise are insufficient. One would imagine that God required nothing more than a constant reiteration of His praises day by day and a repetition of hymns and texts that have been uttered for hundreds of years, that surely by now He must be completely weary of them. For myself, I can only say that the question of God bristles with many problems, some of which we cannot understand, but nevertheless, which I hope some day will be understood.

Do not, however, let us be hypnotised into acceptance of ideas because they have been dinned into our minds week after week, month after month, and year after year, and have now become woven into the subconscious fabric of our beings.

If there is any portion of us which is divine, it is our mind, and unless we are constantly stimulating our minds into action and persist in asking how, why, where and what, we might just as well revert to animal lives, and be content with mere sleep and work, and eat and drink.

The human race can only progress as long as it refuses to be baffled by the so-called mysteries of life, and civilisation can only be advanced as long as we are determined that the generation which comes after us shall know more about God and the universe and nature through our efforts. We must hand on the flaming torch of knowledge, and add something to its lustre and brightness, for if we have not contributed any fresh illumination and helped to dispel some of the gloom in the universe, then indeed our lives have been in vain.