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—TROY TAYLOR, AUTHOR & FOUNDER OF THE AMERICAN GHOST SOCIETY

GHOSTS, APPARITIONS AND POLTERGEISTS

Brian Righi

*An Exploration of the
Supernatural through History*



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About the Author

Brian Righi graduated from DePaul University in Chicago and is the author of numerous books on ghosts and the paranormal. He developed an early love for the topic while traveling through Europe with his parents and continues even today to crisscross the United States, investigating tales of the supernatural and lecturing on his experiences. He currently calls Texas his home, where he lives with his beautiful wife Angela and his favorite cocker spaniel, Madison.



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To my beloved Angela,
for putting up with me and my ghosts.

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Writing a book of this magnitude is certainly not a solitary pursuit and, although only one name ends up on the spine, it really is an effort born from the sweat of many individuals. Having said that, I want to take the time to thank a few of the people who made this book possible. Many thanks to Bob Krause, Vanessa Wright, Karl Anderson, and the wonderful staff at Llewellyn Publishing for believing in the project. Also to Robert Larson for allowing me the time to write when I should have been working. To Carl Hullett and Les Ramsdell, two intrepid ghost hunters who took me under their wing and showed me the ropes. Finally, let us not forget all of the ghost hunters, mediums, theologians, and madmen who came before us and made this field what it is today.

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Like many in this rather unusual field of research, I first became interested in psychic phenomena at a very early age, a fact for which I happily blame my parents. I can remember as a young child sitting around the kitchen table at night with friends and family, as they sipped their strong-smelling coffee and listening to my parents recount their experience of living in a haunted house in Germany. Each night I would sit glued to the edge of my seat, wide-eyed and terrified as tales of sinister ghosts returning after a tragic end filled my ears. Later that night, after all the guests had left and my parents tucked me into bed, the initial thrill and excitement of those stories began to wear off. Then even the floorboard's creak or rattling shutter was transformed by my imagination into the midnight rambling of the scariest ghosts and monsters that ever lurked about a house. Under my bed, skeletons waited for the chance to snatch at my feet, while the closet housed the most ill-assorted collection of demons ever seen. Although I lost a lot of sleep at that age, I never lost my desire to hear more of the stories.

It was with this spirit that, at the age of thirteen, I was fully intent on spending the night in a real haunted house in hopes of encountering a ghost of my very own. At that time there sat an old dilapidated farmhouse on the edge of Miller's Pond, which every kid in the neighborhood knew was haunted. And why not? Weren't all old, shabby, dark houses sitting empty on the edge of murky ponds haunted? In fact, local legend held that the house was home to not one, but two gruesome spirits. A vague tale—no less embellished as it passed from one kid to another—recounted the tragic story of two young lovers who, when told they could no longer see one another, committed suicide in the house. It was said the boy hung himself in the attic over the separation and, when the girl heard of his death, she flung herself into the pond and drowned. Reports circulated among the kids on my block that late at night strange lights were seen in the abandoned structure, and if a kid were brave enough to enter the house at night, he would come face to face with the ghostly lovers. The perfect haunted house!

With such tales in our heads, I set out one night with several other young ghost hunters, without our parents' knowledge (parents never really know what their kids are up to), and approached the house that sat on the edge of Miller's Pond. Filled with the excitement and fear of our first ghost hunt, we were fully intent on capturing a real ghost, even if we had no idea in the world how such a thing was to be accomplished. Tentatively we made our way into the house and through its maze of dusty rooms. The moon rested high in the night sky and its beams lit the broken glass of the house's windows, playing tricks on our eyes. Did something just move in the darkened corner behind us? What was that noise in the ceiling above?

Now I'd like to say that on that night we captured our very first ghost and became instant celebrities, but the truth of the matter is, at the first sound of a creaking board, we ran out of there as if the devil himself were chasing us. To this day I still haven't captured a ghost or become a celebrity, but I have developed a love for ghost stories, which over the years has led me to other dark houses and moonlit cemeteries.

The purpose of this book is to introduce the reader to the fascinating world of ghosts. We'll begin the journey with a look back at the ghost lore of our early ancestors and follow the history of the subject all the way to the Spiritualist movement of the nineteenth century. From there we'll delve deeper into the theories about apparitions, ghosts, and poltergeists, listening to stories about them and critically examining their differences and similarities. Then finally, just when you thought the harrowing trip was nearing its end, we'll spend time with some of the greatest ghost hunters ever to walk a haunted house and learn how to conduct a ghost hunt of our own.

Ghosts, Apparitions, and Poltergeists: An Exploration of the Supernatural through History is sure to have something for everyone. It can be read as either a technical manual for the aspiring ghost hunter or as a collection of scary tales for pure enjoyment. What this book will not do is prove to you beyond a shadow of a doubt that ghosts do or do not exist. That will be for you to decide. So sit back and enjoy this book, but I warn you—you may find yourself sleeping with the lights on tonight.

Happy hunting.

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Chapter 1

DIGGING UP

It is perhaps particularly appropriate that one who is about to make a journey to the next world should look fully into the matter, and tell stories about what we suppose to be the nature of our residence there and after all, how else could we spend the time until sunset?

Plato

The British Museum stood alone in the night and shrouded itself from the rest of London by a dense fog that rolled off the banks of the Thames River. George Smith, an assistant in the Oriental Department, sat at his tiny desk surrounded by mountains of antiquated books and crumbling clay tablets. By the dim light of a lone gas lamp, he squinted at the strange cuneiform writing before him and continued scribbling notes with growing excitement. He knew he had chanced upon a marvelous discovery when, that night in 1871, he translated an ancient Sumerian text, later known as the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, which contained one of the very first accounts of man's belief in the afterlife and one of the very first ghost stories ever written down.

Gilgamesh is the story of a Hercules-like character that roams the land slaying fierce demons and performing seemingly impossible feats of strength and cunning. Modeled after a Sumerian king of the early dynastic period (ca. 2700–2500 BCE), the legend was recorded on twelve clay tablets found at the ruins of the royal library in the ancient city of Nineveh. Gilgamesh, after many dangerous adventures, loses his friend and warrior companion Enkidu during a quest into the dark underworld to meet the spirits. Lamenting the tragedy, he turns to the gods for help, who eventually agree to one last meeting between the two friends. A hole is then opened at the feet of Gilgamesh, allowing the ghost of Enkidu to rise from the underworld and describe for his friend what awaited a Sumerian after his

her death. At first, Enkidu is reluctant to speak of the horrors faced by a spirit in the underworld, but eventually overcomes his hesitation with the warning to our hero that “if I must tell you what I have seen in the underworld, sit down and weep.”

This passage is thought to be the first written evidence that our ancestors believed that beyond the everyday world of toil and struggle there existed another, darker place, inhabited by the souls of the dead. For the ancient Sumerians, the underworld was a place of weeping and darkness, where the spirits of both the good and the evil alike were punished. A dismal thought to look forward to in one's old age, but the Sumerians did allow one saving grace, as Enkidu explains when he continues his speech:

“Have you seen the spirit of the one who has no one left alive to love him?”

“I have,” replied Gilgamesh.

“He eats the leftovers from the pot, the scraps of bread thrown into the gutter, things not even a dead dog would eat.”

To the Sumerians, a man's fate after death was ultimately tied to the conduct of his living relatives. If they performed the proper magical formulas, prayers, and ceremonial offerings for the spirit of the deceased, then the trials and tribulations of the underworld could be made a little more bearable. However, if a person died and left no living descendants to conduct the proper rituals, then only an eternity of pain and loneliness awaited him.

Throughout the history of many cultures, there has existed an apprehension about how the spirits of the dead were affected by the daily rituals of the living. The cosmic outlook of early man was one in which the worlds of the living and the dead were deeply intertwined. The Greeks, for example, were terribly afraid of dying without a proper burial. They believed that when a person died, his or her spirit began the perilous journey into the underworld. Money was placed in the mouth of a corpse at the funeral so that the departing spirit could pay Charon the Ferryman to take it across the River Styx. Foods such as pudding and cheese were placed on the body so that the traveling spirit could propitiate the three-headed monster Cerberus who guarded the entrance to Hades. If these needs were not met, the spirit could not enter into the next world and would be doomed to wander the earth, causing havoc among the living. To ensure that the spirits were sent on their way, the Greeks developed practices centered on the proper disposal of the body after death. For instance, in Athens there was a law stating that if a traveler came across a dead body, whether it be that of a friend or stranger, he was to cast dirt upon it three times. If he failed to do this, he was then required to travel to the nearest temple and conduct the appropriate sacrifices to the gods in order to expiate his sins. In the end, if a traveler neglected to do either, he could be subject to a stiff government fine. Greek sailors also bought a bit of afterlife insurance by tying a small reward to their body when they went to sea, in the hope that if they drowned and their body washed ashore, anyone finding it would have payment for giving them a proper burial.

Of equal concern to the Greeks was the need for the body to be buried within its native soil. If a Greek died far from his homeland, it was thought that his spirit would be unable to find its way back. Trapped in a foreign land, the spirit could not be properly cared for by its living descendants and would be subject to the misery of loneliness and aimless wandering. If a person did have the

misfortune of dying far from home, his or her friends and family would gather and sing solemn invocations to the deceased person's soul in the hope that, by hearing this, the spirit would be comforted and find its way back. If a body could not be produced for burial because it was lost at sea or captured in battle, then a funeral was conducted all the same, with ceremonies and an empty bier as if the body were present. The hope was that a token burial was better than no burial at all.

Another culture that went to great lengths to prepare its dead for the journey to the afterlife was that of the Egyptians. To an Egyptian, death was not the end, but a brief interruption in a life that would continue elsewhere much the same as it had before. Life and death were like the Nile River and the deserts that surrounded it, constant and unchanging. When a person died, food, furniture, clothing, jewelry, and even animals were buried with him or her. This would sustain the spirit in the next life and ensure that nothing would change.

More important, however, was the preparation of the body after death. The Egyptians believed that one component of the spiritual force that remained was called the *ba*, which relied on the body of the deceased for its existence. The *ba* was thought to be able to take on any shape it wanted and leave the tomb, returning to its body at night for rest. In scenes painted on tomb walls, the *ba* is shown as a bird with a human head, hovering over its entombed body. This required that great lengths be taken to ensure the preservation of the body after death, and so began the art of mummification.

When a person died, his or her body was first turned over to the temple priests in the *wabt*, or “place of embalming,” who began the grisly task of preparing the body. First, small iron hooks were inserted through the nasal cavity to rip out chunks of brain matter. The abdomen was then cut open, and the stomach, liver, lungs, and intestines were removed, cleaned, and stored in small jars to be buried with the body. The heart, oddly enough, was left in place because it was thought to be the center of knowledge and will—something that made up the personality of the person and so would be needed in the next life. Finally, the body was washed with a mixture of pounded herbs, such as myrrh and cassia, and palm wine before being stored in natrum, a type of salt, for forty days. Then the body was wrapped from head to toe in strips of linen glued with gum and placed with all its possessions in the tomb. The entire process was carried out with solemn devotion, and each step was accompanied by various magical spells to help the deceased in the next life.

Besides the intricate preparations some cultures made in burying their dead, others maintained strong ties with the dead long after the funeral. The Romans, who held many beliefs in common with the Greeks, celebrated their funerals with public displays that were held by torchlight at night. During these ceremonies, singers would exclaim the praises of the deceased to the tunes of flutes, while actors staged important scenes from the deceased's life. The Romans left food at the tombs of dead relatives so that their spirits could eat, and would sometimes even bury them in their own homes so that they could better be looked after. In the Roman pantheon of spirits, *Lares* were considered good spirits and were invited into homes and towns to act as guardians. Most families had their very own *Lares* composed of deceased relatives, who if treated properly could be called upon to protect the family in times of need.

This concern over the well-being of the dead stemmed from the belief that the spirits required the same things as the living. For instance, in Central and East Africa, it is still believed by some tribes

that when the dead are tired of wandering in the jungle, they will come to someone they know and ask that person to build them a home. When this happens, the person is obligated to assemble the women of the village together at night to sing and dance for the spirit. The next day the village goes to the grave of the *obambo* (ghost) and makes a crude idol representing the dead person. This idol, along with some dust from the ground and the bamboo poles that carried the body to the grave, is brought to a small hut erected next to the house of the person the spirit visited. A white cloth is draped across the door of the hut and the spirit is then thought to reside there, helping anyone who leaves an offering of food.

Caring for the spirits of the dead by leaving offerings of food and other necessities can be found in the customs of many cultures the world over. The Pacific Islanders were known to watch a corpse for seven days following a death to make sure the devil did not come to visit and steal the body away. During this time, the dead person's bed and meals were prepared for him at home in case his wandering spirit grew hungry or tired. Similar traditions exist even today, although we may hardly realize their origins. Christmas, for example, is a time when children delight in leaving milk and cookies for Saint Nick, just in case the jolly old fat man gets hungry delivering all those toys. As innocent as this may seem, however, it is an ancient practice that first began in Ireland when families left spirits returning home for Christmas Eve were rewarded with cups of milk left on the windowsill.

Another means by which our ancestors sought to appease wandering spirits of the dead and ensure their happiness in the next world was to hold a public festival in their honor. In late February and early March, the Greeks held what was called the *Anthestia*. Meals were provided in each home and the spirits were invited for dinner. Once they were thought to have eaten their fill, the family would ask them to leave again for one full year, practically guaranteeing a spirit-free home until the next festival. However, if these public displays and offerings to the spirits weren't observed appropriately or with the proper reverence, there could be dire consequences that would bring harm and even death to the people. The Roman poet Ovid once wrote of a town that had failed to observe the customary feast and offer gifts of fruits, salt, corn, wine, and violets to the *Manes* (ghosts from the underworld). Because of the transgression he recounts that "the injured spirits revenged themselves on the living and the city was encircled with the funeral fires of their victims. The townsfolk heard their grandfathers complaining in the quiet hours of the night, and told each other how the unsubstantial troop of monstrous specters rising from their tombs shrieked along the city streets and up and down the fields."

In many Spanish-speaking countries, as well as the southwestern United States, people celebrate what is called *el Día de los Muertos*—the Day of the Dead. On November 1, altars are built in the family home and adorned with religious icons, special breads, and other foods for the dead. Church services are held and prayers offered for all those who have passed away, after which the graves of loved ones are cleaned and decorated. Picnics, parades, and other festivities follow. The human skeleton or skull is the main symbol of the celebration and decorates everything from candy sugar skulls to skeleton toys performing daily tasks such as dancing or playing musical instruments.

Similar to this is our own festival of Halloween, which has been practiced in the United States since the days of the early colonists. Every October 31, children dress up as ghosts, witches, and any number of horrific monsters. Scampering from house to house, they squeal "trick or treat" as they extend the

bags to receive handfuls of goodies. Children are not the only ones partaking in this celebration, and adults enjoy the occasion by dressing up to attend costume parties, handing out candy, or turning their homes into one-night haunted houses complete with sound effects and monsters that pop out of the darkness.

Halloween or All Hallows Eve dates back to the Celtic festival of Samhain. For one night, the gates to the land of the dead were open and the barrier between the living and the dead was lifted. During Samhain, huge bonfires were set to light the way for the spirits of the dead, and food offerings were left for their journey. The Celts ritualized the event by dressing as the spirits or wild beasts they associated with their gods. Yet the event encompassed more than just the return of the dead; it also meant bringing in the harvests, slaughtering animals for winter, and the beginning of the dark half of the year. This was a time when winter approached and the long sleep of the land under its snow blanket seemed to be a sort of death in itself.

After Christian missionaries reached the British Isles, the festival began to change. A common practice of the early church was to incorporate native customs into a Christian worldview. Pagan practices were adapted, consecrated, and renamed to fit the teachings of the church. Such was the case with the celebration of All Saints Day on November 1, to commemorate those saints that did not have their own feast days to be remembered by. November 2 was named All Souls Day, and was a day of recognition for those that had passed away during the previous year. Further weakening the original intent, the custom of dressing up as the wild and untamed pagan gods became distorted to encompass all the things the Christians feared most, including a long list of demons, witches, and ghosts. It was, after all, a time when the barrier between the living and the dead was at its thinnest, a time when the devil and his minions were given free rein to cause terror upon the earth.

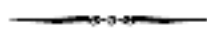
Intricate burial rituals, festivals honoring the dead, and prayers for the departed served one basic purpose—to keep the dead in their graves. Man, both modern and ancient, has tempered his curiosity about the spirit world with a good dose of fear, which in turn has led to some rather colorful ways of dealing with returning ghosts. For instance, some believed that if a person died violently or before his appointed time, his ghost could return to seek its revenge on the living. One of the more common taboos about ghosts related to the proper way to bury those accused of murder or suicide. In the British Isles, authoritative decrees prohibited graveyard gates from being opened to these types of burials. However, there were exceptions. If the family persisted enough, or had enough money and influence, then the body could be allowed in under two conditions: the first was that the casket had to be carried over the wall and not through the gate, and the second was that the funeral had to be held at night when no one could witness it.

Tradition once held that such unfortunates were buried at a secluded crossroads with a stake driven through the heart. The stake would keep them from rising and harming anyone, while the crossroad location was an added precaution. If a restless spirit did rise, it might become confused as to which way to go and therefore couldn't return home to haunt those who had just given the deceased a rather unceremonious burial. In Denmark, returning spirits were so feared that before burial the big toes of the corpse were tied together to hobble the spirit, pennies were placed on the eyes to blind it, and scissors were left on the stomach, opened in the form of a cross, to prevent evil. Before the burial, nothing

the house could be moved in a circular pattern or it might upset the dead, and when the time for burial did come, the coffin would be carried out feet first, so that the spirit could not find its way back.

Even the innocent victims of violence were thought to be able to return seeking vengeance for the wrong done to them. The Norwegians feared one type of ghost more than any other—the *utbrud* meaning “child carried out.” In Norway, when a child was born unwanted or in a time of famine and couldn’t be cared for, it was carried out into the cold, dark forest and left to die of exposure. Many thought the child’s ghost could return and seek its vengeance on the living. Lone travelers passing through some quiet wood or marsh at night were often the prey of the *utbrud*. Being pursued by one of these travelers could only save themselves by splashing into a stream or pulling out a knife, as *utbrud* were thought to fear only water and sharp metal blades.

Usually, however, returning spirits were believed to be tied to their place of death or burial as drawn back to the scene of their tragedy and sorrow. Graveyards were feared and avoided, especially on nights when the moon was full and the mist covered the tombstones in ghostly vapors. Times like these were ripe for spirits and imaginations. As early as the fourth century BCE, the philosopher Plato wrote in the dialogue *Phaedo* a warning against lingering around tombs where the dead still lurked because “it haunts, as men say, monuments and tombs; by these have been seen shadowy forms of souls, apparitions such as souls of this kind provide when they are separated from the body.” In New Zealand, among the Kaffirs and Maoris, the hut where a person died was so feared it was considered taboo and deserted. No one was allowed to approach it and many times it was even burned down. In some instances, a spirit was so feared that the entire village was abandoned.



From man’s earliest time, he appears to have lived with the notion that he was surrounded by a spirit world with which he could interact. At times this notion was embraced, at other times it was feared, and in some cultures we find a strange mix of both. If we were to list the varying spiritual beliefs of every culture throughout history (a task too large for any one book), we would find the common theme that the living and the dead were connected through ritual, superstition, and prayer. The ancient ruins of Nineveh with their crumbling tablets and timeworn tales of ghosts may seem a long way off, but their message continues to echo through to the present day. After death, something exists, and sometimes it comes back. Several years after George Smith translated the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, he set out alone on an expedition to the ruins of Nineveh. Sometime later, his fever-racked body was found in the desert along the way, and after being taken to the British Consul’s home in Aleppo, Syria, he died; perhaps this is a warning of the dangers to be faced for those who dig too deeply.

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Chapter 2

A WITCH'S BREW

*Eye of newt, and toe of frog,
Wool of bat, and tongue of dog,
Adder's fork, and blind worm's sting,
Lizard's leg, and owl's wing,
For a charm of powerful trouble,
Like a hell-broth boil and bubble.*

— WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE

Throughout history there have been those who have claimed the ability or power to pierce the barrier that existed between this world and the next in order to communicate with the spirits of the dead. They were called by a host of names—priest, shaman, necromancer, witch, and medium among others—but what they were called and who was chosen was dependent upon the time period and the culture in which they lived. Some were appointed into a type of priesthood, others were born into a particular caste devoted to the practice, and still others claimed they possessed a particular ability or talent that allowed them to act as a conduit or channel to the spirits. The latter often worked without the “blessing” of the society around them and so found themselves persecuted and exiled by neighbors who deemed the practice of speaking with the dead an evil trade.

One of the first documented cases of mediumship is found in the Old Testament book of 1 Samuel (28:7–16). King Saul, on the eve of a battle with King Achish and the Philistines, sought the help of a necromancer, known as the Witch of Endor, to raise the spirit of the prophet Samuel and seek his help in the coming battle. One night Saul turned to one of his attendants and said, “Find me a woman who is a medium, so I may go and inquire of her.”

“There is one in Endor,” the attendant said.

So Saul disguised himself, putting on other clothes, and at night he and two men went to the woman

“Consult a spirit for me,” he said, “and bring up for me the one I name.”

But the woman said to him, “Surely you know what Saul has done. He has cut off the mediums and the spiritists from the land. Why have you set a trap for my life to bring about my death?”

Saul swore to her by the Lord, “As surely as the Lord lives you will not be punished for this.”

Then the woman asked, “Whom shall I bring up for you?”

“Bring up Samuel,” he said.

When the woman saw Samuel, she cried out at the top of her voice and said to Saul, “Why have you deceived me? You are Saul!”

The king said to her, “Don’t be afraid. What do you see?”

The woman said, “I see a spirit coming out of the ground.”

“What does he look like?” he asked.

“An old man wearing a robe is coming up,” she said.

Then Saul knew it was Samuel, and he bowed down and prostrated himself with his face to the ground.

Samuel said to Saul, “Why have you disturbed me by bringing me up?”

Unfortunately for the king, Samuel refused to help and foretold the death of Saul and his sons the next day in battle. Because Saul had outlawed necromancy in the kingdom of Israel, he had to disguise himself and visit the witch only under the cover of night. For the law of the land was the Law of Moses, which forbade necromancy and witchcraft, a law that was clear on the point: “There shall not be found among you . . . anyone who practices divination, a soothsayer, or an augur, or a sorcerer, or a charmer, or a medium, or a wizard, or a necromancer for whosoever does these things is an abomination to the Lord” (Deuteronomy 18:10–13). The penalty for being caught practicing any one of these dark arts included the pronouncement that a “man or woman that hath a familiar spirit or that is a wizard shall be stoned to death” (Leviticus 20:27). Consorting with the dead, to the Hebrews, was an evil practice that darkened a man’s soul and infected society with its evil. It was therefore not tolerated.

The Romans, on the other hand, held spiritual beliefs borrowed from their Greek cousins. Not only was there a lack of disdain for necromancers, witches, and other mediums, but in many cases they were relied upon to help determine matters both big and small. In the first century CE, the Roman poet Lucan writes in the *Pharsalia VI* of a young man determined to know his future at any cost. One day Sextus Pompey, the son of Julius Caesar’s chief adviser, sought out the help of a horrid Thessalian witch named Erichtho. But before the witch opened the future to young Sextus, she warned him that although she could tell the future through her necromancy, she could not change it. Sextus, determined as ever, quickly agreed and the witch began her dark ritual.

First it was necessary to prepare herself, and to do this Lucan writes that she lived in an open grave surrounded by the corpses of the dead. The first thing she required was a freshly deceased body, which Sextus seemed to procure easily enough. She then passed a long metal hook through the corpse’s jaw and roughly dragged it over rocks and stones until she reached a particular cave. In the inky blackness

of the cave's interior lay a fissure that was thought to drop to Hades itself. Wrapping herself in a magical robe and a wreath of vipers, she cut a hole in the chest of the corpse. Into this she poured the foulest concoction imaginable—the froth of a mad dog, the marrow of a stag fed only on serpents, and the hump of a corpse-fed hyena.

When the body had been prepared in this manner, the witch began a horrendous chanting that seemed to mingle the barking of dogs and the howling of wolves, the screech of an owl, the roaring of wild beasts, the hissing of snakes, the crash of waves on rocks, the murmur of forest trees, and the bellow of thunder. Finally, the apparition of the dead man appeared but refused to enter the body. It could only be lured in after the witch threatened it with all the infernal powers that existed and with the promise that, at the conclusion of the ceremony, the body would be burned to ensure it was never used for this purpose again. The ghost then entered the body, which sprang up and answered all of Sextus Pompey's questions.

We don't know what questions Sextus asked or what replies were given, only that his life would not be recorded as a successful one. Some time later he wound up on the losing side when he opposed Julius Caesar's successor Augustus and he remained a hunted outlaw for the rest of his life.

The Greek system of communicating with the dead was much more organized and nowhere near as gruesome. In every major city across Greece, there was an oracle and a priesthood that, for a price, would divine the future for a person. Although each oracle differed in the method it chose to foretell events, one located in the city of Ephyra was particularly interesting. It was thought not only to be the site where the entrance to Hades was located, but also a place where the living could speak directly to the dead. A person wishing to have his future foretold would journey to the temple and, after presenting the proper gifts, write the question he wished answered on a piece of clay, which was then given to the priest. Once through the temple doors, however, there was no turning back from an ordeal that would last for twenty-nine days. The seeker would have to enter the underworld, a strange place of darkness and dreams, of dimming torches and hypnotic chanting, a place of the dead.

A priest chanting magical prayers would lead the supplicant down a long dark corridor into a small room. Left here, the supplicant would smoke hashish to experience mystical revelations through his dreams, and subside on mussels, beans, and pork, foods associated with the dead. Many days would pass, but in the underground passages of the temple there was only one long night without end. After an unknown period of time, a priest would enter and the person would receive the ritual cleansing of a steaming hot bath followed by an ice-cold drenching. Then, taking the man by the arm, the priest would lead him down another corridor, deeper into the underworld's blackness. Given a stone, the supplicant would throw it behind him in order to ward off any harm that followed and ensure his safety through the corridors. The end of this passage led to a great labyrinth of small rooms that the seeker passed through until he was completely bewildered and confused. Eventually he reached a hole in the ground, the legendary entrance to Hades where the souls of the dead waited.

Having entered the underworld, eaten the food of the dead, and seen many strange visions within its dark nightmare realm, the supplicant had reached the twenty-ninth day of his journey—the day the dead would speak. The supplicant would pour the blood from sacrificed animals into the hole to be drunk by the souls of the dead, allowing them to regain consciousness in order to foretell the future.

Then, rows of priests would file in, chanting hypnotically the magical words to raise the dead. From the darkness of the ceiling above, a large cauldron would descend and remain suspended above them. At this point, an apparition would appear from the cauldron and answer the seeker's question. However, the answer the apparition would give was always in a cryptic verse that required the recipient to decipher its true meaning. Afterward, the supplicant would be purified with sulfur fumes and led out into the blinding sunlight of the world above. He had traveled through the underworld, spoken with the dead, and survived.

The ritual practice of raising spirits in order to foretell the future or solicit advice was important in many early cultures, but as the centuries wore on, this cult of the dead faced an enemy far greater than all the legions of Rome: the Christian church. In the West, the fledgling church of Christ was coming into its own. No more were only the slaves and peasants looking forward to a better life in heaven. Now kings and emperors were bowing to this new, unstoppable power—a power built on the Law of Moses, a power that would accept no other gods before it. Constantine the Great became the first Christian emperor and enacted a general prohibition against the oracles. Throughout the empire, the church proclaimed that the power of oracles, witches, and necromancers came from Satan. In 319 C.E., Emperor Constantine persecuted diviners with the decree that “a soothsayer who approaches his neighbor's house is to be burnt; anyone inviting him, whether by persuasion or by money reward, is to be deprived of his goods and banished to an island” (Bettenson 1954, 26).

The battle for the hearts and minds of the people shifted back and forth until about the seventh century, when the church became the primary authority in the West. However, to its shame, this battle was not fought with the rhetoric of debate or the truth of one system over another, but with fire and sword. Untold numbers were killed over the centuries, many of them innocents. The few remaining practitioners of the old ways faded into the shadows as the Christians tore down their oracles and replaced them with churches. As a fitting epitaph to the conquest, one of the last verses uttered by the oracle at Delphi was recorded as, “The fountains are silent; the voice is stilled.” This voice would remain only the hint of a whisper until one day, in a new land, it would begin to shout—or rather, knock.

[\[contents\]](#)

Chapter 3

“HERE,

Knock three times on the ceiling if you want me . . .

THEY CHASED AN OUSE

It was a quiet winter’s night in 1847. Outside the small wooden house in Hydesville, New York, the snow was settling across the landscape in drifting mounds. John and Margaret Fox had just finished tucking in their two daughters, Kate and Margaret, for the night. It had been a long day and the only thing they could think of now was retiring to the warmth of their own bed. There was little sound about the house at this late hour, the wind blowing against the windowpanes, the occasional pop and hiss of the fire, and then a new sound added itself to the others. A strange thumping began that seemed to come from the ceiling above the girls’ room, a rapping noise with a rhythm that seemed almost intentional. Perplexed, John searched diligently for the source of the noise but could find nothing. Finally he gave up for the night and the couple retired to bed, hoping that the morning would bring some relief from the phantom knocking. By sunrise it had stopped, and the family members went about their day, reluctant to discuss what their Methodist preacher would have called “the workings of the devil.” The day passed, and as bedtime approached, the Foxes looked forward to a night of peace and quiet—and that’s when the knocking began again. Each night the knocking repeated itself, and no matter how hard the family searched for the source of the noise, each night they were left without explanation. For three months the knocking continued without a possible source being discovered.

On the night of March 31, 1848, Kate and Margaret were still awake, listening to the knocking and

obviously unafraid, when they devised a game. Kate snapped her fingers and called out “Here, Mr. Splitfoot, do as I do.” The girls often referred to the knocking as “Mr. Splitfoot,” which at the time was a common nickname for the devil. This time, however, the knocks answered back by mimicking Kate’s snapping.

Much to John and Margaret’s dismay, word began to spread concerning the strange happenings at the Fox home. People from all over came to hear the knocks for themselves and soon the Fox family was inundated with curiosity seekers. Always willing to entertain their inquisitive visitors, the Fox sisters developed a code in order to communicate with what they claimed was a ghost. The system worked like this: the girls would call out questions and the spirit would respond by knocking once for “yes” and twice for “no.” Mr. Splitfoot was also capable of rapping out the number of years a person was old or the number of fingers a person held up.

In time the system grew to include letters of the alphabet and, with this more complex system of communication, the spirit began fleshing out an identity of its own. Through the coded knocks it claimed to be the ghost of Charles B. Rosma, a peddler who supposedly had been murdered when the former resident of the house, John C. Bell, a blacksmith, slit his throat with a butcher knife. It claimed that Bell took five hundred dollars and the peddler’s box before burying the body in the cellar. The next day the basement was dug up, but no body was found and John Bell denied any knowledge of his involvement in such a crime. Nor would the authorities investigate the matter further—after all, no one even knew if the murder had really occurred.

The crowds that descended on the Fox home, eager to see the two sisters, began to make life unbearable for the family. It was decided that the two sisters should be split up and sent to live with their relatives. Kate went to live with their older, married brother, David, while Margaret went to live with their sister Leah Fish, a widowed music teacher. At this point, critics of the Hydesville haunting (and there are many) claim that with the separation of the sisters, the knocking stopped. Supporters, however, maintain that not only did the knocking continue, it developed into a full-blown haunting.

Regardless of the happenings back at the homestead in Hydesville, the sisters began communicating with various other spirits at their new homes. They would often invite people over for sittings, which Margaret called “spirit circles,” and which later became known as séances. In 1849, during one of these spirit circles, Margaret claimed to receive a message from one of the spirits telling her that the time was right to hold a public demonstration of their powers and enlighten the masses as to the existence of an afterlife. Based on this otherworldly advice, the sisters rented the Corinthian Auditorium and charged spectators one dollar apiece. During the show, they allowed a committee of audience members to observe them closely and give a report to the overcrowded hall afterward. The committee concluded at the end of the show that they had no idea as to how the knocks were manifesting.

Suddenly a star was born—or rather three stars, because after their sister Leah witnessed all the attention Kate and Margaret received, she also developed the ability to communicate with the spirit world via rapping. So with Leah as their new manager, Kate and Margaret began touring the United States, demonstrating their uncanny powers. They held sittings for some of the most important figures of their time, including Mary Todd Lincoln, James Fenimore Cooper, and Harriet Beecher Stowe. For

a time they even gave exhibitions at P. T. Barnum's museum.

In January 1850, Margaret allowed a committee of doctors to examine her over the course of several sittings. What they discovered, interestingly enough, was that although they could not account for how the knocks were being manifested, the sounds could not be produced if Margaret's legs were held tightly together while sitting. But the report put out by the committee did little to diminish the fame of the sisters. Instead, their popularity grew, and oddly enough, so did the phenomena they exhibited during their sittings. New sounds were added to their repertoire and they even convinced the spirits to materialize for their audiences.

The spark was lit, and the Fox sisters popularized the beginnings of a movement in the United States known as Spiritualism. Now common folk began meeting in darkened rooms across the nation attempting to conjure the spirits of the dead. Everyone from socialites, to con artists, to housewives came out of the woodwork claiming mediumistic abilities. Yet the Fox sisters cannot take all the credit or all the blame (depending on your view). In the 1800s, the United States was ripe with independent religious thought, and earlier mesmeric demonstrators who went into trances and diagnosed diseases paved the way for the Spiritualists. The Christian church, with its reactionary views, came to see the movement as an infectious disease and struck back with denunciations both from the pulpit and in the papers. The *Olive Branch*, a Methodist paper published in Boston on June 19, 1850, quoted a Catholic source as saying:

“Our readers . . . will hardly believe that this delusion has so spread over New England, and towns in other states of New England origin, that scarcely a village can be found which is not infected with it. In most small towns, several families are possessed, the mediums between erratic ghosts and the crazy fool being, in some cases, a weak half-witted woman, but in most instances, a little girl, whom her parents and friends have prostituted to this wicked trade.”

It seemed as though the long-dead enemy of the church had raised itself back to life and was enjoying fertile ground in a country thirsting for a sense of spiritual identity. The various denominations of American Christianity promised all the wonderful trappings of an afterlife, but the attractiveness of Spiritualism lay in its promise to *prove* an afterlife, complete with floating spirits.

The debate over Spiritualism prompted early scientists to investigate claims of mediumship and attempt to prove or disprove the validity of mediums. Many were opposed to the fantastical nature of the subject and set out with a vengeance to discredit the movement. The great Harry Houdini, for instance, besides being a world famous escape artist, spent a great deal of time exposing various mediums as fakes. Others had a genuine interest in discovering the true nature of the phenomenon and helped found what would later become known as the science of parapsychology. In addition to being studied by doctors and lay committees, the Fox sisters were observed by prominent scientist William Crookes under strict laboratory conditions. Crookes was not only unable to find any traces of fakes but became convinced of the reality of the sisters' powers. Commenting on their legendary spirit knocking, he stated: “It seemed only necessary for her to place her hand on any substance for loud thuds to be heard in it, like a triple pulsation, sometimes loud enough to be heard several rooms off. In this manner I have heard them in a living tree, on a sheet of glass, on a stretched iron wire, on a stretched membrane . . . moreover actual contact is not always necessary; I have heard these sounds proceeding from the floor, walls, etc., when the medium's hands and feet were held” (Crookes 197

113). Crookes continued to study other supposed mediums and eventually came under fire for what many considered a glaring naiveté. The issue had become a three-sided fight between the allure and popularity of the Spiritualists, the fear and traditions of the church, and the logic and tools of science.

The powers of the Fox sisters were questioned again when, on April 17, 1851, a relative of the Fox sisters, Norma Culver, told the *New York Tribune* that Kate had confessed to her that she made the rapping noises herself by cracking the joints of her toes. Both sisters denied this, however, and continued to enjoy celebrity status until the late 1880s. Although still in demand, the Fox sisters' personal lives were by then in shambles as they suffered through divorce and alcoholism. On September 24, 1888, Margaret admitted to the *New York Herald* that she and her sister Kate were frauds. One month later, on October 21, she described to the *New York World* how she and Kate had started the knocking with an apple tied to a string in order to frighten their mother. Later, when crowds began flocking to their home, they were too frightened to admit their little joke and so began producing the sounds by cracking their joints. During their spirit circles, their sister Leah furnished information to them about the people they were sitting for, which they passed off as otherworldly revelations. To further prove the hoax, the sisters took the stage at the New York Academy of Music and demonstrated to the packed house just how they faked the rappings.

These admissions would lead one to think that the Fox sisters were through and that their hoax might even topple the Spiritualist movement. However, this couldn't have been further from the truth; those involved in the movement, and even the public at large, simply refused to believe that it was all untrue. Supporters of the movement claimed the sisters were paid or even coerced into these damaging testimonies by the Catholic Church, or that the ravages of alcoholism clouded their minds. Whatever their reasons, two years later, hungry again for the spotlight, the sisters recanted their earlier confessions and returned to the séance table. But they never regained the fame that they once enjoyed and died impoverished in the 1890s.

The Spiritualist movement did not remain simply an American phenomenon. Like a pebble thrown into a pond, its rings of influence spread ever wider. From Hydesville it spread to New York, then to London, Cuba, and South America, eventually reaching as far away as Turkey.

Although the Fox sisters are certainly considered pioneers in the Spiritualist movement, the award for the most exciting medium of the 1800s would have to go to Daniel Dunglas Home. This Scottish-born American traveled Europe demonstrating amazing powers during séances, which included everything from materializing spirits to causing inanimate objects to move on their own. In 1855, Home established what would later become known as the Browning Circle at the residence of John Rymer, a wealthy London solicitor. Prominent among the many famous Londoners that attended this informal gathering were writers Robert Browning and Elizabeth Barrett Browning.

Home likened himself to something of an ambassador for the otherworld and traveled about as the continual houseguest of several rich patrons. True, he never charged for a séance, but neither did he shy from accepting gifts or donations. Home's séances at the Rymer house were typical of the time. The sitting was held in a dimly lit room where the guests gathered. First, Rymer's dead child Watt would make himself known by speaking through Home while in a trance. After Watt's departure, any doubters present were asked to leave before the spirits would agree to come forward. With the

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