

Biography of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle (1859-1930)

Most remembered as the creator of the fictional detective “Sherlock Holmes,” Sir Arthur Conan Doyle hoped that he would be most remembered for his books and lectures on life after death. He considered his two-volume 1926 book, *The History of Spiritualism*, as his most important contribution to mankind. After joining the Society for Psychical Research (SPR) in 1894 and investigating many cases of mediumship, Doyle moved from materialist and skeptic to believer to ardent Spiritualist and propagandist, the latter term used in its original sense – one who promotes a cause with great zeal. He devoted the better part of the last decade of his life to attempting to convince the world that consciousness survives physical death.



“From the moment that I had understood the overwhelming importance of this subject and realized how utterly it must change and chasten the whole thought of the world when it is wholeheartedly accepted, I felt ... that all other work

which I had ever done, or could ever do, was nothing compared to this,” he explained his mission.¹

Born in Edinburgh, Scotland of Irish Catholic parents, Doyle attended Roman Catholic public schools, graduated from Stonyhurst College in Lancashire, then spent a year studying in Germany before returning to Scotland and earning his medical degree from Edinburgh University in 1881. He practiced medicine, including service as senior physician of the South African field hospital during the Boer War, until 1890, when he decided to become a full-time author. His first Sherlock Holmes story was published three years earlier, in 1887, and was an immediate success. His knighthood in 1902 was a result of his book *The Great Boer War* in which he defended his homeland’s involvement in the war.

Doyle’s introduction to psychic phenomena was at the home of one of his patients, when he observed table turning séances and apports. This experience prompted him to join the SPR. He carried out a number of experiments with a Mrs. Bell and satisfied himself that telepathy was a fact. However, he remained a skeptic relative to the survival of consciousness issue. It was reported that when he and Professor Oliver Lodge were knighted in 1902, they engaged in a debate over psychic phenomena and survival, Doyle apparently taking a non-survival position. Frederic W. H. Myers’ 1903 book *Human Personality and Its Survival of Bodily Death* helped move him into the survival camp and eventually to become a dedicated Spiritualist.

Many of his critics assume that Doyle converted to Spiritualism after the World War I death of his son Kingsley on October 28, 1918, but the record is clear that he declared his belief in life

after death two years earlier, in an article in *Light* magazine dated October 21, 1916. He began lecturing on psychic phenomena in 1917 and was about to go on the platform at Nottingham to speak on Spiritualism when he received a telegram informing him of Kingsley's death. Moreover, his book *The New Revelation* was published in June 1918. *The Vital Message* was published the following year. "Anybody who has read this record will not need to be convinced that he did not go blindfolded into Spiritualism," wrote John Dickson Carr, one of his biographers. "He had studied for nearly thirty years before coming to a judgment. Cruel bereavement he certainly had suffered, though not the greatest bereavement; and deeply he felt the agony of the world in chaos."²

In a November 16, 1911, letter to his good friend Samuel Harper, Conan Doyle wrote that the hell-fire of Catholicism with which he was indoctrinated during his youth significantly impacted him and influenced his leaving the Catholic faith. "Even my choice of philosophy if you can't call spiritualism a religion, may have been dictated by the circumstances of my childhood," he continued. "We may suffer the derision of our fellows for our beliefs, but we enjoy the knowledge that the spirit is free to return, even across the valley of death. ... But if Catholicism would not do, still I could not live without religion. It is too much a requirement of the Celtic nature, I guess. And after years of searching and having lost so much with the deaths of so many I dearly love, I had to find a belief which would meet my needs. That the spirits of the dead live on and can communicate with us may not be everything. But it is a beginning and I'm perfectly willing to devote my life and all my wealth to discovering the rest."³

Doyle said that World War I made him view the whole subject with even greater earnestness. "In the presence of an agonized world, hearing every day of the deaths of the flower of our race in the first promise of their unfulfilled

youth, seeing around one the wives and mothers who had no clear conception whither their loved ones had gone, I suddenly seemed to see that this subject with which I had so long dallied was not merely the study of a force outside the rules of science but that it was really something tremendous, a breaking down of the walls between two worlds, a direct undeniable message from beyond, a call of hope and guidance for the human race at the time of its deepest affliction."⁴

It is not clear when the sitting with a Mr. Southey took place, but it apparently influenced him more than anything else. "For two hours my wife and I had sat within listening to the whispering voices of the dead, voices which are so full of earnest life, and of desperate endeavors to pierce the barrier of our dull sense," Conan Doyle wrote. "They had quivered and wavered around us, giving us pet names, sweet sacred things, the intimate talk of olden time. Graceful lights, signs of spirit power had hovered over us in the darkness. It was a different and wonderful world. Now with those voices still haunting our memories we had slipped out into the material world – a world of glaring iron-works and of twinkling cottage windows. As I looked down on it all I grasped my wife's hand in the darkness and I cried aloud, 'My God, if they only knew – if they could only know!'"⁵ It was this experience, he believed, that launched his crusade, including voyages to Australia, New Zealand, South Africa, and the United States to lecture on Spiritualism.

During his travels, Doyle sat with many famous mediums, including Etta Wriedt, Minnie Soule ("Mrs. Chenoweth"), George Valiantine, Joseph Jonson, Anna Wickland, Mina Crandon, and Marthe Beraud ("Eva C."). In his home country, he sat with Estelle Roberts, Eileen Garrett, Evan Powell, Annie Brittain, John Sloan, Kathleen Goligher, and William Hope, to name just a few. "With so much practical work behind me," he wrote, "the reader can imagine my feelings when in a public debate upon the subject with Dr. Haldane of Cambridge my distinguished opponent

said, 'I once knew a medium.' In my reply I asked him what he would think of me if I contradicted him upon some point of chemistry, and said, 'I have once been in a laboratory.'"⁶

And yet, unfortunately, Doyle is most remembered in the psychical research arena for being duped in the case of the Cottingley Fairies, which involved some photographs taken by two young girls supposedly showing fairies prancing around in their Cottingley, Yorkshire, garden. Doyle concluded that the fairies were real and his 1921 book *The Coming of the Fairies*, in which he discussed the existence of fairies and nature spirits, followed. This endorsement of fairies branded Conan Doyle as being totally credulous and is often cited by debunkers and skeptics to discredit all psychic phenomena observed not only by Doyle but by others. Nearly all of his biographers, obviously fans of Sherlock Holmes, seem to want to apologize for their hero having strayed into the occult world, charging it to his age (55 when he began his crusade) or, they surmise, his grief resulting from the death of his son, brother, and two brothers-in-law, all during the war years, made him escape into unreality. It is ironical, perhaps paradoxical, that the creator of a shrewd, rational detective should have gone down in history as something of an absent-minded professor.

Doyle's interest in fairies was expressed a decade before the Cottingley Fairies fiasco. "I am aware that much has been made of my interest in faeries, leprechauns, etc. just as I am aware this is all attributed to my Irish background, the world assuming that the Irishman expects to find a faery under every bush," he wrote in a letter to Samuel Harper on November 30, 1911.⁷ But Conan Doyle saw his interest in fairies as incidental to and independent of the life after death issue. While there is no scientific evidence of such nature spirits or elementals, as they are sometimes called, a number of people with clairvoyant ability have reported seeing such beings.

Sir Arthur's wife, Jean, developed as an automatic writing medium. "Our first written

communications, dating from early in 1921, were from relations and friends who had passed beyond the border," he wrote. "Occasionally also we had visits from strangers who were attracted by what they called 'the light' – a common other-world description of the psychic atmosphere of a séance."⁸ He went on to say that on December 10, 1922, he heard from Pheneas, his guide, for the first time. Pheneas then became Lady Doyle's primary control and in April 1924 her mediumship changed to semi-trance inspirational talking. Conan Doyle's 1927 book, *Pheneas Speaks*, set forth much information, as communicated by Pheneas, about the afterlife environment. "For the sake of unborn generations a new right understanding of God, the great, tender Father of all must be given to humanity, and the old theological misconceptions of God as a Judge must be swept away," Pheneas communicated on October 10, 1926. "Love, not fear, must reign in each heart. Humanity must know the kind of existence they will lead in the lower greyer spheres if their lives are selfish and evil in the earth plane. Knowledge of where a man's actions are leading him will help and inspire him to live at his highest and what to avoid. The knowledge of the real and human happiness in the higher worlds ahead will give a man courage in facing sorrows and difficulties on this earth."⁹

In spite of the fact that his interest in psychic matters cost him many friends and also cost him much money, Doyle remained dedicated to his mission. "I cannot do anything else," he told his wife. "All my life has led up to this. It is the greatest thing in the world."¹⁰

After his death, many mediums, including Lady Conan Doyle, began receiving messages from him. Perhaps the most detailed are those that came through the London medium Grace Cooke, beginning in May 1931. "I have passed through what you know as the astral life, and have now been cleared from the conditions which were hampering my work," he communicated through Cooke. "To clear a soul of the astral vi-

brations is not altogether an easy matter; but do not be misguided with regard to this state; it is a necessary evil. To be freed from these astral ties does not sever a man from those he loves, but it sets free his spirit and allows him to enter into the full realization of his own nature.”¹¹ He went on to say that he now recognized certain things in which he was mistaken.

“No man can have the entire truth,” the discarnate Doyle continued. “In some respects I was misled. Before my passing I had had some suspicions regarding astral memories, and was aware that certain spiritualistic phenomena were attributable to these memories. But I did not believe that *all* such communications arose from this cause; nor do they! I tell you definitely that it is possible for the human spirit, which is the real man – if that man has a definite mission to perform for the good of humanity – to come back to

execute it and so help forward the evolution of the race.”¹²

Doyle further explained that when he wanted to communicate with those on the earth plane he had to attune himself to the degree of mental life possessed by those whom he contacted. “Thus, sometimes I speak from the astral plane, sometimes from the planes above; but I have always to attune my vibration to the condition provided...I now come back to reveal a finer life, a nobler path than had ever dawned on my earthly conception. All must be put right. Man must be taught the truth concerning his life after death.”¹³



Copyright 2010 Michael E. Tymn

¹ Carr, John Dickson, *The Life of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle*, Barnes & Noble Books, 1994, p. 268.

² _____, p. 255.

³ Harper, Leslie Vernet, *The Secret Conan Doyle Correspondences*, Hascom Publishers, 1986, pp. 62-63.

⁴ Cooke, Ivan, *The Return of Arthur Conan Doyle*, The White Eagle Publishing Trust, 1985, pp. 8-9 .

⁵ Doyle, Sir Arthur Conan, *The Wanderings of a Spiritualist*, Ronin Publishing, Inc., 1988, p. 16.

⁶ Doyle, Arthur Conan, *The Edge of the Unknown*, G. P. Outnam's Sons, 1930, p.112.

⁷ Vernet, p. 70.

⁸ Doyle, Arthur Conan, *Pheneas Speaks*, George H. Doran Co., 1927, Preface, p. vi.

⁹ _____, pp. 194-195.

¹⁰ Carr, p. 271.

¹¹ Cooke, p. 55.

¹² _____, p. 56.

¹³ _____, pp. 82-83.