

Biography of Estelle Roberts (1889-1970)

Estelle Roberts (May 10, 1889 to May 1970) was a British clairvoyant, trance-voice, direct-voice, and healing medium. "Though I have read all the worth-while literature in Spiritualism produced in the last hundred years, I have not come across any account to excel the proofs received in the séance room of Estelle Roberts, one of the world's greatest mediums and the possessor of nearly every psychic faculty," wrote journalist Maurice Barbanell, himself a medium of some repute.¹

Although she recalled hearing voices and seeing apparitions since her childhood, Roberts did not really understand her gift until 1920, when she was 31 years old and a neighbor invited her to attend a Spiritualist church with her. There she was told by a medium that she (Roberts) was a medium and that she should go home, sit at a table, and the spirits would make contact. Roberts followed instructions, but nothing happened. She tried six more times, but still without results. "When I could stand it no longer I got up in disgust, telling myself that other people might be mediums, but I certainly was not," she related in her autobiography. "I picked up the table and carried it across the room to its accustomed place by the opposite wall. It was a solid table, with tripod legs, and it required considerable effort for me to lift it. 'Well, that's that,' I thought. I shall not be so easily persuaded the next time."

However, as she walked away the table rose into the air and hit her in the back. She ran to the far end of the room and the table pursued her, returning to the floor with a thump. She then heard a voice, which said, "I come to serve the world. You serve with me, and I serve with you." When Roberts asked for an identity, the voice replied, "Red Cloud." She then began to see the top part of a man's figure surrounded by a halo of

white light and discerned an olive-skinned man with dark eyes and a small black beard. "I knew with unwavering certainty that my true mission in life – whatever it may be – had just begun," Roberts wrote.²



She soon began giving clairvoyant and clairaudient readings at various Spiritualist churches. She recalled one reading in which a young man came for the sitter and uttered, "Not bloody likely, not bloody likely." Roberts did not know what to make of it until the young woman explained that these words – from Bernard Shaw's *Pygmalion* – had been agreed upon before his death as the password he would give if he were able to communicate.³

Her trance-voice mediumship, in which Red Cloud spoke through her vocal organs, did not begin to develop until 1925. "A small group was sitting with me in an experiment to discover the extent of my psychic powers," Roberts explained. "I was not in a deep trance, and therefore had some knowledge of what was happening. It was as though I was partly present, partly detached. No doubt Red Cloud chose this semi-trance state to give me confidence before entranc-

ing me fully, when all consciousness is withdrawn."⁴

Roberts could hear what Red Cloud said through her vocal cords, though she had no control over what was said. She further explained it as a "drowsy consciousness" of what was going on, seemingly hearing the voices of the sitters and the voice of Red Cloud coming through her as if from afar. "I have a strong sense of detachment, of being an onlooker rather than a participant," she described it. "It is almost a feeling of helplessness as I realize that the words put into my mouth are not my own."⁵

Three or four years after developing the trance-voice, Roberts began developing as a direct-voice medium. She wrote that her small group sat fortnightly for 10 months without any progress, but Red Cloud encouraged them to continue. When the voices finally started coming, they kept coming, almost without break. While some direct-voice mediums require no trance at all, Roberts required full trance for this phenomenon and darkness. (In the direct-voice, the spirit voices would come through a floating trumpet, which was to amplify the voices.) During the deep trance required for the direct voice, Roberts, who described it as a heavy, dreamless sleep, knew nothing of what was going. However, shorthand reporters took everything down and she was later able to review the proceedings. Roberts believed that the direct voice offers the most convincing evidence of survival after death.

"...to my mind, the Estelle Roberts phenomena are by far the best evidence of their kind of which modern Spiritualism can produce a record," wrote British journalist Hannan Swaffer, adding that the spirits speaking through the trumpet at her sésances "have character and personality, and they differ, every one of them, from all the others."⁶

Swaffer mentioned the case of Sir Henry Segrave as one that particularly touched him. Segrave was a famous British sportsman who had set a number of land and sea speed records, and was the first person to exceed 200 mph on land.

He was killed in a speedboating accident on June 13, 1930. Swaffer, who had been a friend of Segrave's, asked his fellow journalist, Maurice Barbanell, if he could arrange a sitting with Estelle Roberts for Segrave's widow. Barbanell had planned to accompany two other friends to a sitting with Mrs. Roberts on January 22, 1932, but when one of them came down with the flu the friends were forced to cancel. Barbanell then contacted Lady Segrave to see if she could make it, but she already had another engagement and so he went by himself. As was routine, nothing was said to Roberts of the intended sitters.

After Roberts entered the trance state, Red Cloud gave his usual introductory remarks, after which Barbanell heard a voice addressing him. Barbanell asked who was speaking. "Segrave," was the response. "Thank you for trying to bring my wife." Barbanell asked him for a message for his wife, which he readily gave. Two weeks later, Lady Segrave sat with Roberts and began a series of sittings in which she conversed with her husband. Much of it was personal information unknown to Roberts or anyone else. "The whole of his conversation was very characteristic, full of intimate details, so that I knew beyond doubt it was my husband," Lady Segrave told Barbanell.⁷

Lady Segrave brought a former friend of her husband's to one sitting. He was the Earl of Cottenham. Speaking through the trumpet, Segrave addressed him by his first name, Mark, and carried on a personal conversation with him. "I have publicly affirmed, and here I do so again, that I have no reasonable doubt of the genuineness of these psychic communications," the Earl of Cottenham wrote. "After patient and searching investigation, such common sense and logic as I possess can find no other explanation that that I have actually conversed with friends and relatives whose physical bodies I know to be dead."⁸

Barbanell related a number of other cases involving Roberts in his several books, including the story of Bessie Manning. Half-way through one sitting, Red Cloud addressed Barbanell and told him there was a child present on his side who

wanted to get in touch with her mother. The young girl then identified herself as Bessie Manning and said that she had died of tuberculosis on the prior Easter. She said she had her brother Tommy, who had been killed by a motor-car, with her. Bessie told Barbanell that her mother had read his (Barbanell's) reports on Estelle Roberts and had prayed that some day she (Bessie) would be able to communicate to her through Mrs. Roberts. Barbanell asked for her mother's address and it was given as 14 Canterbury St., Blackburn. Barbanell proceeded to make contact with Mrs. Manning and confirmed that her daughter, Bessie, had passed the prior Easter and that her son, Tommy, had been killed nine years earlier. "Here was verification of the perfect spirit message," Barbanell wrote. "No theories of telepathy, or subconscious mind can explain it away. No suggestion of fraud or collusion can be entertained."⁹

Barbanell then arranged for Mrs. Manning to attend a sitting, at which Bessie again communicated and offered more in the way of evidence of her identity. "I heard my own daughter speak to me, in the same old loving way, and the self-same peculiarities of speech," Mrs. Manning penned for Barbanell's book. "She spoke of incidents that I know for a positive fact no other person could know. I, her mother, am the best judge, and I swear before Almighty God it was Bessie."

Many spirits, including Tommy, Bessie's brother, were unable to communicate through the trumpet, as it became increasingly clear to Barbanell and others that some technique had to be mastered on the other side and not all were capable of doing it. Also, many of those who were able to communicate, including Segrave, struggled in their early attempts but gradually mastered the technique.

Dr. A. G. Thompson, a physician who had a number of sittings with Roberts, heard from various relatives. "At a trance sitting, a sister, deceased over twenty years ago, was brought to me by Red Cloud. She gave me her full name and many other particulars, and referred to a living

sister in a certain way that was quite peculiar to herself," he recalled one of them. "She mentioned a book of hers that she said was in my possession, the existence of which I had no conscious knowledge. Coming home after the sitting I found the book as described after a long search."

But Thompson added that his belief in the genuineness of Mrs. Roberts' mediumship was also based on the cumulative evidence provided by other sitters, often newcomers and strangers to both Mrs. Roberts and others in the group. "Their relatives and friends manifest, often giving evidence of their identity in the most remarkable and particular way. I have listened to all sorts of voices – speaking in the tone and manner of well-educated folk, and others who disregarded their aspirates and the rules of grammar. Others, again, possessed well-marked Scots or Irish accents. I have heard a Scots sitter swapping reminiscences of the war with his erstwhile comrades in the trenches, the comrade reminding him of 'what happened to old Ginger, the man with the long neck' and 'how they greased the General's boots!' All this in broad Scots."¹⁰

Thompson said there was no possibility of fraud, pointing out that even a super-detective agency would not have been able to come up with some of the names and facts communicated by the spirits. As for any theory of ventriloquism, Thompson recalled that he was sitting close to Roberts at one sitting when she had a coughing spell, and yet the voices continued to come as she coughed. "Personally I feel that there is no other explanation for the phenomena of the direct voice than the plain and straightforward acceptance of the view that the spirit guide is what he claims to be, and the voices what they claim to be," Thompson offered.¹¹

In addition to acting as a control for Roberts during the direct voice and handling the introduction and closing during the trance voice, Red Cloud delivered many lectures through Roberts in the trance voice, some of them before packed audiences at the Royal Albert Hall in London. "Red Cloud cannot be described," said

Swaffer. "When you know him you love him, so full is he of wisdom, kindness and helpfulness. He never speaks ill of anybody and never condemns. Often he breaks into poetry, blank verse and rhyme mixed up, much of it perfect metre and rhythm and occasionally almost Shakespearian in its beauty...Often he uses language so beautiful that you find tears in your eyes, and you are glad it is dark. Sometimes he quotes modern poetry which the medium has never read. When asked where he obtains it, he tells you he has access to all the literature and poetry that has ever been written. He speaks of the 'Council' on the Other Side. He personifies a Plan. His knowledge of the Bible is amazing. Yet, although he prefers to be known as an Indian, I feel certain it is only a cloak that hides his real self."¹²

Of Red Cloud's true identity, Roberts said that in her nearly 50 years of being controlled by him, it was never revealed. "He has never told us who he was on earth," she wrote. "When asked, he has always answered: 'Know me by my works.' We know that he passed this way before us, when he probably dwelt in Egypt...We know that his identity as a Red Indian is a cloak which is assumed in order to make receptive by us the very high vibrations that are naturally his because of his advanced spiritual attainment."¹³



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¹ Barbanell, Maurice, *This is Spiritualism*, Herbert Jenkins, Ltd., 1959, p. 30.

² Roberts, Estelle, *Fifty Years a Medium*, Corgi Books, 1959, pp. 25-26.

³ _____, pp. 31-32.

⁴ _____, p. 33.

⁵ _____, p. 120.

⁶ Barbanell, Maurice, *The Trumpet Shall Sound*, Rider & Co., 1933, pp. 8-9.

⁷ Barbanell, Maurice, *Across the Gulf*, Psychic Press, 1940, p. 31.

⁸ Barbanell, *Trumpet*, p. 66.

⁹ Barbanell, *Gulf*, p. 122.

¹⁰ Roberts, pp. 196-197 (as quoted from a book titled *Why I Believe in Red Cloud* by Estelle Boutcher).

¹¹ _____, p. 198.

¹² Barbanell, *Trumpet*, pp. 11-12.

¹³ Roberts, p. 206.