

*Rossell Hope Robbins*

## THE ROCHESTER RAPPINGS

OF ALL THE HUNDREDS of mischievous or possessed children that history has recorded, only in one household did the antics of two adolescent girls (later helped by a conniving elder sister) start an international movement which claimed to be a revealed religion—spiritualism. Why America about 1850 should have been so receptive to Catherine and Margaretta Fox is a problem for the sociologist. The growing desire to form one's own religious conclusions, the credulity which craved for pseudo-scientific explanations, the craze for mesmerism, the lack of critical thinking—all may have helped the spread of spiritualism.

The Fox sisters were by no means the first, as has sometimes been asserted, to see "intelligence manifested even in the rapping." The poltergeist Drummer of Tedworth could rap out a tune in 1663, even though his repertoire was limited to the ditty "Cuckolds and Roundheads." At John Wesley's home in Epworth, a poltergeist in 1716 protested by rappings the family prayers for the king. In 1762, little eleven-year-old Elizabeth Parsons and a servant, Mary Frazer, anticipated the Fox girls by questioning the "spirits" and making a code to secure answers by varying numbers of knockings. This hoax of the so-called Cock Lane Poltergeist, however, did not produce a cult: instead Mary Frazer and the parents of Elizabeth went to jail for fraud. In 1850, in the north of France, fourteen-year-old Clement Bunel was linked to intelligent rappings. And "Doctor Diotrefhes" in *The Knockings Exposed* (1856) listed minor American parallels (at Rahway, New Jersey, and Stratford, Connecticut).

The difference between other poltergeist mediums and the Fox sisters was that the Fox spirits claimed to be the dead friends or relatives of those seeking information about an afterlife; thus their universal appeal competed with established religions, and offered a longed-for palliative of those fears often engendered by the concept of hell.

In December, 1847, Mr. and Mrs. John D. Fox and two of their six children moved into a house "in the small village named Hydesville in the

town[ship] of Arcadia, Wayne County, New York." Incidentally, Hydesville is only ten miles from the farm where Joseph Smith said he unearthed the golden plates that revealed the mysteries of Mormonism. The Fox house was moved in 1916 to Lily Dale (over a hundred miles away), and is still a shrine for the cultists. Mrs. Fox recalled the beginning of the curious events:

Very soon they were disturbed after going to bed by various noises, which, however, did not attract much attention, as they supposed them to be made by the rats which do sometimes of themselves have strange doings . . . . On the last day of March, year 1848, they determined to go to bed early, so as to get a good night's rest, in spite of all noise, but this was not permitted.

The noises came again, and Catherine, "the youngest Miss 'Pythia', little vulpy", who felt quite at home with the rappings, mocked them by snapping her fingers and saying, "Here, Mr. Split-foot, do as I do." "The sounds instantly followed her with the same number of raps", reported the first pamphlet on the subject in 1848. Then Catherine snapped her fingers noiselessly, but the raps continued to imitate her. "Only look, Mother", she is said to have exclaimed, "it can see as well as hear." This comment, declared the British spiritualist Todd, is "the sublimest truth of modern times."

The 1848 pamphlet has Mrs. Fox saying:

The noises were heard in all parts of the house. My husband stationed himself outside the door while I stood inside, and the knocks came on the door between us. We heard footsteps in the pantry, and walking downstairs; we could not rest, and I then concluded that the house must be haunted by some unhappy restless spirit.

According to Elliott, "The thought then struck Mrs. Fox, whose bed was in the same room with that of her two daughters, Margareta, [then] aged [twelve], and Katy, aged [nine], that she would question the noise." To inquiries about the age of her children, the correct number of raps were tapped out. Then she asked:

Who makes the noise?

Is it made by any person living?

Is it made by anyone dead? *Rap.*

If by an injured spirit? *Rap.*

If injured by her or her family?

If by various other names?

Getting no further reply, she arose somewhat excited, and called her husband, and some of the neighbors who were yet up.

Extended questioning produced the astounding information that the spirit was that of a man murdered five years previously by a former tenant, that the corpse was buried in the cellar, but that four months must elapse before digging for the body should take place. "Mrs. Fox stated, that upon digging at the time mentioned, her son and two others found some pieces of bone, but whether or not those of a man does not seem to have been ascertained." However, forty-one neighbours testified to the good character of the accused former tenant, a Mr. Bell; and when he returned in anger to Hydesville, tempers flared against the Fox family. Circumstantial evidence came from a fifteen-year-old servant, Lucretia Pulver, who had worked for the Bells. She said that a peddler, Charles Rosma, had come to the house, but that she had not seen him depart. Later she heard noises and footsteps echoing through the house and had stumbled on loose dirt in the cellar! The spirit rappings said that Rosma had five children, but it is curious that no one at the time started searching for a disappeared father. Succeeding tenants said they heard unusual noises; and spiritualists claim that these were the same noises that disturbed the Fox household. In 1904 an almost complete skeleton was allegedly discovered in the Fox house, but the lapse of half a century and the need of a new religion for holy relics make this discovery of dubious value.

The notoriety of the rappings spread rapidly, and within a month, on one Sunday morning, five hundred people gathered round the house. The neighbours were not very cordial about these mysterious rappings, furniture moving, and other mild poltergeist disturbances; and the local Methodist church forced the Foxes' withdrawal. Some even called Margaretta an "unholy witch-woman", and ministers said the family was "in league with the evil one". So the Fox family quitted Hydesville. Margaretta and Catherine went by way of the Erie Canal to live with an elder sister, Leah, now Mrs. Fish, at Rochester. Mrs. Fish, after an early marriage at fourteen, had been abandoned by her husband, and lived by teaching music. Wherever the girls visited, sounds occurred, as on a trip to Auburn, "where the spirit communicated freely." Nor were sounds ever heard when the girls were not present.

The same kind of deviltry which made Abigail Williams delight in disrupting the solemn services at Salem was manifested in the Fox sisters. Davenport, an early biographer of the girls, reported:

Father had always been a regular Methodist in good standing, and was invariable in his practice of morning prayers; and when he would be kneeling upon his chair it would sometimes amuse the children to see him open wide his eyes

as knocks would sound and vibrate on his chair itself. He expressed it graphically to mother: "When I am done praying, that jiggling stops."

For the first year in Rochester, the girls did not attract much attention. "Mrs. Fish seems to have devoted herself to developing and elaborating the falsehood of spiritualism", observed Davenport. Similar comment was made in *The Rochester Knockings* (Buffalo, 1851), which noted that Leah (Mrs. Fish) was "apparently the *managing partner*, conducting the spiritual communications, while [Margaretta], it was clear, was the performer, i.e., the one that produced the knockings." One is reminded very forcibly of Mrs. Ann Putnam and her daughter at the Salem trials. In fact, Davenport, who was authorized to issue the confessions of the two sisters, called Mrs. Fish "the evil genius of these unfortunate victims."

Poltergeist rappings chased Mrs. Fish out of one house and followed her into another. Still a third move was made when the neighbours lodged complaints. At this time, Isaac Post, who later became a medium, developed the alphabet interrogation system, which had been first used to learn the name of the peddler. The spirits—or the girls—chagrined at the lack of attention, decided to hold a public meeting in Corinthian Hall, the largest auditorium in Rochester, at twenty-five cents admission, on November 14, 1849. Further meetings followed, and small committees of local people examined the girls for fraud, finding no mechanical aids. At a final meeting, a riot broke out, and the Fox sisters fled by a side door.

The general reaction of the public was summed up by the *New York Weekly Tribune* (December 15, 1849):

As for these spirits in Western New York or elsewhere, it strikes us they might be better engaged than in going about to give from one to three knocks on the floor in response to successive letters of the alphabet; and we are confident that ghosts who had anything to communicate worth listening to, would hardly stoop to so uninteresting a business as hammering.

The rappings were discussed in a number of pamphlets. Probably the first still extant, *Mysterious Noises, which are supposed by many to be communications from the spirit world*, by D. M. Dewey, published in Rochester in 1850, described the sounds as varying

from a light metallic, clear sound to a dull, muffled one, like a rap with the knuckles upon a partition covered with cloth. When one rap is heard, an affirmative is meant. Silence, instead of giving consent, implies a negative. When a question is asked which does not admit of an answer by a single yes or no, the alphabet is called for by a peculiar rap. In spelling out a sentence by letters,

one of the ladies commences repeating the alphabet and when the desired letter is mentioned, a rap is heard.

A Rochester Universalist minister, Charles Hammond, has left a lengthy description of a séance in January, 1850, where answers to questions were given by the alphabet method:

A lighted candle was placed on a large table, and we seated ourselves around it. . . . The sounds told me my age precisely, though my appearance is such as to indicate a difference of eight or ten years. The names of six of my nearest deceased relatives were given me. I then enquired, "Will the spirit, who now makes these sounds, give me its name?" Five sounds directed me to the alphabet, which I repeated until the name "Charles" appeared, which answered to an infant child whom we consigned to the grave in March, 1843. To my enquiries, it gave me a true answer in regard to the time it had been in the spirit-land, and also the period since my eldest sister's death, which was nearly eighteen years—the latter fact not being recollected then, I found true by dates on my return home.

Charles Hammond experienced table moving, and left a diagram showing the routes. In addition, he said, "I have felt myself and chair uplifted, and moved back a few inches and several slaps as with a hand on the side of my head."

Mrs. Fish found séances a source of profit; the usual fee was one dollar (at that time a considerable sum). Often, as Margareta later admitted, they would gross \$100 or \$150 a night. Horace Greeley, the editor of the *New York Tribune*, was one of their patrons, and helped pay for Catherine's education. Some of the celebrities who visited the girls were James Fenimore Cooper, William Cullen Bryant, and Jennie Lind.

In a little while, the Fox family felt constrained to explain the rappings by a sort of crude philosophy, revealed, they claimed, by Benjamin Franklin, who told them, "There will be great changes in the nineteenth century. Things that now look dark and mysterious to you, will be laid plain before your sight . . . I sign my name, Benjamin Franklin." This clue was followed up by Andrew Jackson Davis, the "Poughkeepsie seer", in his weird *Philosophy of Spiritual Intercourse* (1851). Davis, who had a total of five months' schooling, and had in 1843 become a professional clairvoyant, discussed further "the origin and early progress of electrical communications (i.e., rappings) as accomplished by the inhabitants of the spirit-land." Then, remembering that the mediums sometimes made mistakes, Davis, who claimed communication with Paul the Apostle, inserted a caveat: "And, I think, from [Benjamin Franklin's] explanation of the unavoidable derangements in the vibrations, that my

readers already begin to understand why mistakes and contradictions are evolved from this new method of intercourse between the natural and the spiritual worlds." Davis was responsible for giving publicity to the Fox sisters, for he had anticipated spiritism in his *Principles of Nature* (1847), which went through thirty-four editions in thirty years. Soon, a whole rash of mediums appeared, claiming ability to converse with spirits. Frank Podmore (in *Modern Spiritualism*) estimates that in the first six years of spiritualism, from 1849 to 1854, there were between two and five thousand mediums at work in the United States. By 1864, according to Thomas P. Backus, in a penny pamphlet, *A Lecture on the Brothers Davenport*, published at Newcastle-on-Tyne (England), there were five million believers.

In addition to spirit conversations, mediums added to their accomplishments guitar playing, trance speaking, table moving, and spirit writing. In 1852, the Rev. Charles Hammond published *Light from the Spirit World*, which he said was "written wholly by the control of the spirits, without any volition or will by the medium, or any thought or care in regard to the matter presented by his hand." In the same year, Isaac Post, the friend of the Fox sisters, brought out his *Voices from the Spirit World*, ghosting for such dead celebrities as George Washington, Voltaire, and Napoleon. Colton [*sic*] Mather dictated a message regretting his part in the Salem delusion.

Dewey's *Mysterious Noises* explained the mission of the spirits producing the raps as "to benefit mankind . . . by imparting important truths." Parents grieving over the death of a child, for example, were reassured with the promise of eternal happiness:

The father was excited even to tears; in his joy, he wept! His thoughts were at once drawn from the lonely churchyard, where he in grief had seen the loved ones laid away from him in the cold earth. His children were with him again! Death died in an instant; and the parent was not bereft! He spoke to his own, and his own answered him. Their conversation was in substance as follows, the replies to the questions being spelled out by alphabet through the sounds:

Are you happy?

Yes.

Do you visit me sometimes?

Dear Father, we are always with you.

Do you love music as you did when on the earth? And can you indulge in that delight where you are now?

Yes. (And here a tune was rapped out by them together, as they had been in the habit of accompanying each other when in this world.)

Do you desire to have me with you where you are?

Not yet.

Would you like to return to earth?

No! This is a happy world.

This comfort is typical of spiritualism. As defined in 1871 by Dr. George A. Lathrop in East Saginaw, it "teaches us that though the body be dead, the soul still lives and loves." At first, belief in communication with spirits was held by members of different religious persuasions, as an additional doctrine. Not until 1893 was a spiritualist church founded, deriving its tenets largely from Andrew Jackson Davis. To this later restricted development, the life and works of the Fox sisters made no direct contribution.

As with Elizabeth Parsons and Mary Frazer in 1762, Nemesis finally caught up with the Fox sisters, but the great tide of spiritualism flowed on in spite of their exposure. Charles Elliott, in his *Mysteries* (1851), prints several documents to this end. Elliott attended a séance on May 1, 1851, in New York:

I mention another question which I wish to ask; state that there was something unexplained in the manner of the death, which I should be glad to have made clear. Mrs. Fox then calls my attention to a creaking sound apparently near the leg of the table next to which Margaretta sat.

*Mrs. Fox:* Does that remind you of his death?

*Margaretta:* It is like a ship.

*Katy:* It sounds like it.

[Elliott:] It certainly does, and my friend's death was in some incomprehensible way connected with the water.

*Mrs. Fox:* Will you (to me) write on the paper, names of diseases and modes of death?

I do so: fever, drowned, knocked on the head, apoplexy, placing my pencil upon each name. I receive a rap at "knocked on the head".

Elliott added:

It is proper to say that the name given of my friend was not correct; that he had no connection with a ship; and that it is quite certain that he did not die as the spirit seemed to think.

But the two most important early statements exposing the fraud came from a Buffalo physician and from a Mrs. Norman Culver, a sister-in-law of the Fox sisters. Dr. Charles A. Lee was one of three doctors connected with the University of Buffalo who investigated the sisters. He discovered that if the girls' feet were placed on cushions, no rappings were heard. After nearly an hour's silence, "it was suggested that the ladies be allowed to take any position they pleased, and see if any 'raps' were then heard. Accordingly, they

seated themselves on the sofa, their feet resting on the floor, when immediately a loud succession of 'raps' followed, and continued for several minutes." Then Dr. Lee tried another test:

Seating ourselves before the ladies, we grasped each of their knees firmly, so as to prevent any lateral movement of the bones; the "raps" immediately ceased, and were not heard while the knees were thus held, except near the close of the experiment, which continued forty minutes, when two slight sounds were heard on slightly relaxing my grasp, while at the same time I distinctly felt the heads of the bones grating on each other, and the muscles contracting.

Dr. Lee, according to the *Rochester Knockings* (1851), discovered other women who had the power to make similar rappings by cracking the knee so that "the large bone of the leg (*tibia*) is moved laterally upon the lower surface of the thigh bone (the *femur*), giving rise, in fact, to partial lateral dislocation." He thought that to make these sounds effortlessly would require considerable practice. He concluded his diagnosis:

Every person, almost, can snap their finger joints; many, also . . . can snap their toe-joints; and some their ankles, producing a pretty loud "rap" when placed in contact with some sonorous body; but the same phenomenon is very seldom met with in the larger joints, as the knees; and when it is, it has escaped particular observation, and not been made known to physicians, as it neither requires, perhaps, nor admits of medical aid.

It may be mentioned that earlier, in 1850, Dr. Potts suggested a similar explanation, and at a public meeting, writes Capron, "stood on the stage of Corinthian Hall and cracked his toes, to the great delight of his literary audience."

The second statement and blow to spiritualism came on August 17, 1851, by Mrs. Norman Culver, whose husband's sister had married David Fox. After two years' acceptance of the spiritual nature of the rappings, she became suspicious. She posed as eager to help in the séances, but actually she wanted to discover the techniques of the deception. Her account confirms and amplifies that of Dr. Lee:

After I had helped her in this way a few times, she revealed to me the secret. The raps were produced with the toes . . . . After nearly a week's practice, with Catherine showing me how, I could produce them perfectly myself. At first, it was very hard work to do it. Catherine told me to warm my feet, or put them in warm water, and it would then be easier to rap; she said that she sometimes had to warm her feet three or four times in the course of an evening. I found that heating my feet did enable me to rap a great deal easier. I have

sometimes produced a hundred and fifty raps in succession. I can rap with all the toes on both feet; it is most difficult to rap with the great toe.

Catherine told me how to manage to answer the questions. She said it was generally easy enough to answer right if the one who asked the questions called the alphabet. She said the reason why they asked people to write down several names on paper, and then point to them till the spirit rapped at the right one, was to give them a chance to watch the countenance and motions of the person; and that in that way they could nearly always guess right . . . . She told me that all I should have to do to make the raps heard on the table would be to put my foot on the bottom of the table when I rapped, and that when I wished to make the raps sound distant on the wall, I must make them louder, and direct my eyes earnestly to the spot where I wished them to be heard. She said if I could put my foot against the bottom of the door the raps would be heard on the top of the door . . . . When I was at Rochester last January, Margareta told me that when people insisted on seeing her feet and toes she could produce a few raps with her knee and ankle.

This somewhat rare physical ability was discovered by accident. Mrs. Culver continued:

Elizabeth Fish (Mrs. Fish's daughter), who now lives with her father, was the first one who produced these raps. She accidentally discovered the way to make them by playing with her toes against the footboard while in bed. Catherine told me that the reason why Elizabeth went way west to live with her father, was because she was too conscientious to become a medium.

In 1857 a public investigation was conducted under the auspices of the *Boston Courier* by a committee of three Harvard professors. Mediums were invited to demonstrate their prowess under their own conditions. Catherine and Mrs. Fish appeared and produced a few noises. The committee reported:

Nothing was done, by the most famous mediums which could be collected in the country, far and near, except a little rapping by the Foxes, easily traceable to their persons and easily done by others, without the pretense of spirits; not a table or piano lifted or anything moved a single hair's breadth; not a bell rung, not an instrument played upon; not any phenomenon or manifestation exhibited or even attempted. (*Boston Courier*, June, 1857)

Nearly thirty years later, in 1884, Margareta (Mrs. Kane, by then a widow) appeared before the Seybert Commission of the University of Pennsylvania, set up to examine the claims of various mediums. After a very uneven display, the professors concluded that the raps were restricted solely to her body, no matter whether Margareta produced them consciously or not. As

a matter of fact, Margaretta never claimed directly any spiritual power, and her professional card always read: "Mrs. Kane does not claim any spirit power, but people must judge for themselves."

The final stage in the career of the Fox sisters as mediums came in 1888, and confirmed the earlier reports of Dr. Lee and Mrs. Culver. After several letters to the press, a public meeting was announced at the Academy of Music in New York for Sunday evening, October 21, at which Catherine and Margaretta would denounce spiritualism and explain how they produced the raps. Margaretta Fox had for an interim of eight years been a convert to Roman Catholicism, but had drifted back into professional mediumship in order to have money for drink. Catherine, also a widow (her husband had died in 1881), was continually drunk; her children had been taken out of her custody, and she had been arrested for vagrancy. At the meeting, only Margaretta spoke, somewhat incoherently, to the effect that she and Catherine had been dominated by her elder sister Leah (Mrs. Fish) for her profit. Margaretta confessed:

The rappings are simply the result of a perfect control of the muscles of the leg below the knee which govern the tendons of the foot and allow actions of the toe and ankle bones that are not commonly known. Such perfect control is only possible when a child is taken at an early age and carefully and continually taught to practice the muscles which grow stiff in later years.

Margaretta demonstrated how she produced rappings by her toes, standing on a pine table while loud raps echoed throughout the auditorium.

Later, both sisters retracted their confessions, claiming undue persuasion by Roman Catholics in an effort to "crush spiritualism". However, when they made their retraction, both sisters were discredited alcoholics. Catherine died in July, 1892, at the age of fifty-three, and Margaretta in 1893, aged fifty-seven, their final days spent in poverty and obscurity.

#### BIBLIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

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as is the unpublished 1933 M.A. thesis by Franklin W. Clark, "The Rochester Rappers", typescript in the University of Rochester Library. Table-rapping is discussed in Johann Joseph von Görres, *La Mystique divine* (Paris, 1882), Vol. III, and in William Jackson Crawford, *Reality of Psychic Phenomenon* (New York, 1918).

Many books and pamphlets were written on the Rochester rappings by those who attended the seances. All copies of the earliest, *A Report of the Mysterious Noises* (Canandaigua, 1848), have apparently disappeared. It was drawn on for the "authorized" volume by D[ellon] M[arcus] Dewey, *History of the Mysterious Noises Heard at Rochester and Other Places Supposed To Be Spiritual Communications* (Rochester, 1850), and was quoted at length by Capron, Owen, Britten, and Underhill (all spiritualists): Elcab Wilkinson Capron, *Modern Spiritualism* (Boston, 1855; rev. New York, 1870); Robert Dale Owen, *Footfalls on the Boundary of Another World* (Philadelphia, 1860); Emma Hardinge Britten, *Modern American Spiritualism* (New York, 1870); and Anne Leah [Fox, Fish, Brown] Underhill, *The Missing Link in Modern Spiritualism* (New York, 1885). Mrs. Britten gave her personal copy of her book to Thomas Olman Todd, a British spiritualist, who rehashed it (with help from Owen's *Footfalls*) as *Hydesville* (Sunderland, 1905). Other contemporary sympathetic accounts of the Fox sisters appear in Adin Ballou, *Exposition of Views Respecting the Principal Facts . . . Involved in Spirit Manifestations* (Boston, 1853); Judge John Worth Edmonds (with George T. Dexter), *Spiritualism* (New York, 1854); Robert Hare, *Experimental Investigation of the Manifestations* (New York, 1856); and Epes Sargent, *Planchette* (Boston, 1869). Hostile reports come from Charles Wyllys Elliott, *Mysteries, or Glimpses of the Supernatural* (New York, 1852); Hiram Mallison, *Spirit Rapping Unveiled* (New York, 1855); [anon.] *The Rappers: or the Mysteries, Fallacies, and Absurdities of Spirit-Rapping, Table-Tipping, and Entrancement, by a Searcher after Truth* (New York, 1854); "Doctor Diotrephes", *The Knockings Exposed* (New York, 1856); Mary D. Wellcome, *Spiritualism Exposed* (Richmond, 1860). A sceptical report of the important Buffalo meeting was reprinted as *Rochester Knockings* (Buffalo, 1851), which also quotes the 1850 tract. A partial biography of Margaretta Fox occurs in the anonymous *The Love Life of Dr. Kane* (New York, 1866), and in Reuben Briggs Davenport, *The Death Blow to Spiritualism* (New York, 1888; repr. 1897), which includes the authorized final confessions. See also Allen Putnam, *Witchcraft of New England Explained by Modern Spiritualism* (Boston, 1888).

Many of the absolute flood of ephemeral pamphlets and books on spiritualism in the New York Public Library are now unfortunately disintegrating. Among many others may be mentioned Rev. James Porter, *The Spirit Rappings and the Infidelity of the Rapping Fraternity Exposed* (Boston, [1853]); Henry Wickcliffe, *Rappo-Mania Overthrown* (Boston, 1853); Rev. C. M. Butler, *Modern Necromancy* (Washington, 1854); [anon.], *Further Communications from the World of Spirits Given Through a Lady* (New York, 1861); and J. M. Peebles, *Witch-Poison and the Antidote* (Troy, 1872).

*"I care nothing for spiritualism. So far as I am concerned, I am done with it. I will say this, I regard it as one of the very greatest curses that the world has ever known . . . . Spiritualism is a humbug from beginning to end."*—Catherine Fox Jencken, October 10, 1888.

## TO HIM WHO IS IMPRESSED THAT HE IS HE

*Helen Sue Iseley*

There is no groove of tenderness recessed in his being.  
His sensitivities are colder than metal,  
For even little, hard nails will swing  
In a given magnetic field. But his petals  
Of spirit open only for his enormity  
Floating above a sea of chaff; none will ever  
Bruise his ego, for he is afraid of conformity  
Unless he is boss and the sheep eat his clover.  
He hoes the roots of rights, especially his own,  
And takes little tastes of evil, as he chooses.  
He will spit in your face if you mention his buried bone  
Of surrealism made human. His roses  
Mean you could die in a pool of blood-splatter.  
He stems his way through such inconsequential matter.