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The Mediumship Of: William Stainton Moses

William Stainton Moses (1839-1892) is best known for his contribution to Spiritualist thought and literature. What is often overlooked is his ability as a talented and very able physical medium. As Beloff comments, he was a medium 'whose physical phenomena were said, by those fortunate enough to be allowed to sit with him, to be as powerful as those of D. D. Home himself'.(1)

After being ordained as a Minister and working in the Isle of Man and Dorset, his poor health caused him to cease his duties, whereupon he went to London and took up the post of teaching the son of Dr Stanhope Speer and his wife; he also taught at University College School until 1889. It was in 1872, through the reading of Robert Dale Owen's *The Debatable Land*, recommended to him by Mrs. Speer, that his interest in the subject of Spiritualism was kindled. This prompted him to visit mediums, including D. D. Home. On one occasion, Moses exposed a fraudulent medium, surely an indication of his desire for genuine phenomena.

In due course, Moses developed his own mediumship, and in mid-1872, he sat in a circle with Dr Speer, Mrs. Speer and sometimes, other persons. In the early stages, the circle experienced raps and table movement that responded to sitters' inquiries. Later on, there was the occurrence of communicators making themselves known and the levitation of various objects. This was followed by the manifestation of apports and fragrant odours. On 30 August 1872, Mrs. Speer recorded not only the apports, but the levitation of Moses; later that same year, Dr Speer also testified to Moses being levitated and the movement of objects.

It was the event on 22 August 1872, which was momentous: on that date, Moses began to produce automatic writing during a séance. In the following month, 'direct writing' was produced, i.e. paper located under the table was found to have 'Imperator' written upon it. On 19 December, the control calling himself Imperator, spoke for the first time by direct voice. These were the activities that

from March 1873 led to Moses' Spirit Teachings published in 1883) that 'has been dubbed the "Bible of British Spiritualism";(2) many of the teachings by certain communicators are given in this book. Nelson refers to the lack of generally agreed beliefs by Spiritualists, but says 'the nearest we can get to this is probably contained in a book called Spirit Teachings'.(3) By the time of his death, Moses had composed twenty-four books containing information given through automatic writing from March 1873 for the following ten years, four that pertained to physical phenomena between 1872 and 1875, and three of a summary nature. Myers of the SPR confirmed that in the case of the first category of books, he 'searched them carefully for any sign of confusion or alteration, but without finding any'. Moses referred to the messages where the gist never varied and the style of writing remained unchanged despite the length of time during which this took place.(4) The fact that the communicators were not the product of Moses' own mind was exhibited by Moses being able to read a book or occupy himself with something unrelated to the communications when the automatic writing was produced; in these periods, the writing was not affected by Moses' distractions.

There can be no doubt that Moses found the teachings imparted by the communicators to be disconcerting: his writings show his own immense struggle with what was said, this being diametrically opposed to the Christian faith that he once expounded as an Anglican clergyman. Moreover, they exhibit his determination to verify that the communicators were actual persons. Wilson notes how Moses 'argued long and bitterly, attacking the "spirit teachings", but the communicators 'refused to budge an inch'.(5) In view of the identities claimed by some of the communicators, i.e. well-known historical personages, Moses was aware that this would be more likely to attract ridicule than provide weight to the communications; he therefore did not reveal who they were, and this information only became known after his death. Myers, who produced an extensive essay concerning Moses, observed that in the case of these teachers, the information was emanated through 'a stream of influence'. To illustrate this point, he cited one communicator who, while confirming that return was possible, nevertheless stated, 'I am very distant from you now'.(6) Although Moses acted as a medium for these persons, he also acted as a medium for other categories, i.e. those who had died many centuries before, and those who had only recently done so. Until the end of 1872, only Moses had witnessed spirit lights, but on 31 December 1872, the sitters also saw these, i.e. a cross, and moving lines of light. From this time, séances were often accompanied by raps, fragrant odours, lights and apports.

Moses' mediumship continued to develop and in June 1873, he recorded what was seen by those present: 'Large globes of light...went into the room where the sitters were placed...They were sufficiently bright to...cast a strong reflection into the room...They seem to have been carried by a materialised hand'. (7) Mrs. Speer described the occasion of when 'many beautiful spirit lights appeared.

Some were very large...Musical sounds then came around us. Both rooms were often quite illuminated through the brightness of the lights'.(8)

Moses also saw his controls during séances and underwent OBE's and visited the spheres; in one that took place at the beginning of 1874, it upheld the Spiritualist belief in the 'Summerland'. In this experience, he became separated from his physical body and was met by one of his controls. He described how 'the scenery through which I passed was like an earthly landscape, but the air was more translucent, the water more clear and sparkling, the trees greener and more luxuriant'; on arriving at a 'simple cottage', he was temporarily reunited with his grandmother.(9) Moses also recounted an OBE that included a meeting with Imperator. Of this he said: 'It was Imperator, as I have before seen him...The face was earnest, benevolent and noble in expression...The whole effect was so dazzling that I could not look steadfastly at it'.(10) At the end of 1872, Moses recorded how during a séance, the Speers saw a light, although he saw a person within this and as it faded from sight, Moses asked who this was. In Imperator's style, 'Myself' was rapped out in reply. Such communications with Imperator were significant as he was to become the principal control, and an agent for some of the greatest teachings supplied from the next world, as recorded in Spirit Teachings.

In the case of Moses' mediumship, it is apparent that in the initial stages, while circle members were conscious of various phenomena, Moses' clearly enjoyed a greater and deeper awareness of this and the relevance. Nonetheless, the sitters came to a meaningful experience of what was happening as the séances conducted by Moses provided individual phenomena for those present. For example, in the séance held on 10 August 1873, Dr Speer recorded how a light appeared, and through the entranced medium, the communicator said: 'You see; now listen, I will knock'. At this, the table was pounded three times. Dr Speer continued by recording how the communicator then said: 'Now I will show you my hand' and Speer recounts: 'A large, very bright light then came up, and inside of it appeared the materialised hand of the spirit. He moved the fingers about close to my face'.(11)

From March 1873, the sounds produced were like that of many types of instruments, including a harp. These became so loud that they vibrated the table and could be heard in other rooms. Moses noted that: 'The sound would traverse the room and seem to die away in the distance, and suddenly burst forth into great power over the table...The sounds were at times deafening'.(12) As so often happens, tests conducted demonstrated a significant change in temperature during a séance. Not only were the séances sometimes rather noisy, events did not always proceed smoothly: On January 25, 1873, Moses recorded how after the table was levitated to head-height, the sitters requested that something be brought in from another room in the house. A heavy bronze candlestick was produced, and

Moses complained that it 'struck me heavily on the head, and hurt me considerably...'.(13)

Myers supplied a good summary of Moses' mediumship, i.e. intelligent raps, object movement, levitation, apports, automatic writing, noises, odours, lights, dematerialization and the limited materialization of communicators: these occurred while Moses was both entranced and fully conscious.(14) However, in view of the effects of Moses' mediumship, this has naturally attracted attempts to discredit his work.

Podmore, who was hardly an ally of Spiritualism, referred to the possibility of fraud, and well-intentioned deception, but admitted that Moses' personality, 'contradict[s] such a supposition' and such activity 'hardly seems to fit Stainton Moses'. With regard to the fashionable suggestion that Moses was mentally unstable, Podmore had to admit that Moses showed no signs of undue abnormality.(15) Myers, who met Moses in 1874, testified to the medium's 'manifest sanity and probity'. Furthermore, he gave two examples of when Moses was notified of deaths that could not have been known to him by normal means; he also cited the instance of a woman communicator whose writing was unknown to Moses and when this was shown to the woman's son, 'the resemblance appeared incontestable' and was also confirmed by an expert.(16)

Charlton Speer, the son of Dr and Mrs. Speer, confirmed to Myers that the phenomena occurred some distance from Moses; noises were heard from different heights, and the lights approached from the opposite location of where Moses was seated. Moreover, in a lighted environment, 'the medium's hands and face could therefore be plainly seen, and even then raps could be heard in other parts of the room'. He also mentioned the voices that spoke independently of Moses; these were invariably indistinct, but on occasions it was possible to hear something of what was being said and 'these sounds generally seemed to be in the air above us'. He also referred to the occurrences of direct writing and the occasion when after a séance, he personally requested this 'under test conditions'; after being given an affirmative answer, he left paper in a room and after ensuring the area was vacated by all persons, and securing all points of entry, he went outside and remained by the locked door. On entering again, a message had been left for him on the paper.(17)

As noted, Dr and Mrs. Speer were regular circle members; after Dr Speer died in 1889, Moses was with Dr Speer's family and saw him, and told Mrs. Speer that he did not understand the term used by Dr Speer for his wife that had just been conveyed. Mrs. Speer recognized it as being her husband's pet name for her that he only used when they were alone, a point about which she was absolutely adamant, i.e. there was no opportunity by which Moses could have become aware of it.

In considering the authenticity of his mediumship, it has to be borne in mind that complete details of his séances were not made available until after he had died. In fact, during much of the period of his activity, his writings only bore the pseudonym of 'M.A. (Oxon.)'. As Carrington understandably concluded, if Moses was seeking attention, and did this through fraudulent mediumship, there would be little point in doing so, but also keeping his mediumship a secret. (18)

Moses was anxious to ensure the phenomena arose from actual communicators, and these strenuous attempts are detailed within his writings. His actions depict a desire to verify firstly, the communicators were in fact next-world communicators, and secondly, that they were who they claimed to be. Moses' records make repeated reference to this endeavour, and consequently, they also supply details regarding how confirmation was only obtained after the communication. For example, on one occasion, a communicator gave details of his death a week before; the newspapers were then unsuccessfully scrutinized for a notice of this, and it was only confirmed by enquiring at Somerset House where the details were found.(19) There were other similar instances: one being that of Thomas Wilson who communicated in 1874. He supplied considerable and very specific details about himself unknown to the circle, and these were subsequently confirmed as correct. Furthermore, on obtaining a letter that he had written before death from a friend, this not only verified the style of writing, but also contained the same misspelling that had occurred in the automatic writing produced by Moses.(20)

It is evident that Moses' background as a clergyman contributed to him not only working as a medium, but believing that Spiritualism was something to be vigorously preached. Despite his persistent ill-health (he died in 1892 through Bright's disease), his determined effort to proclaim Spiritualism is demonstrated by the work that he did in addition to his mediumship. Moses was a member of the BNAS (British National Association of Spiritualists), one of the many early Spiritualist organizations in this country. He was also a vice-president of the SPR, although he found it necessary to leave in view of the direction that it adopted. With the demise of the BNAS, Moses launched the LSA (London Spiritualist Alliance), and was its President at the time of his death; the LSA later became the College of Psychic Studies, that still exists: Moses' notebooks are in its archives. He was editor of *Light*, often contributing to this, and also wrote in *Human Nature* and the *Spiritualist*, and assisted in the formation of the Ghost Club. In addition to the writings referred to above, he also produced *Researches in Spiritualism* (that appeared in *Human Nature*, 1874-5), *Psychography* (1878), *Spirit Identity* (1879) and *Higher Aspects of Spiritualism* (1880).

Moses' activity is so very indicative of vigorous nineteenth century Spiritualism and the principal reason why he is to be deemed one of its foremost pioneers. It was this mode of dedication by this type of pioneer that undoubtedly led to the acceptance of Spiritualism and/or survival by so many in the period. To Stainton Moses, the outcome of Spiritualism was not merely something to be

experienced, but expounded, developed and demonstrated. And it is noteworthy that the Noah's Ark Society's endeavours and stated aims coincided with this essential sentiment. It is a shame they had to finish!

NB. This article appeared in the April and May 1996, Noah's Ark Society (NAS) News Letter

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- (10) *Stainton Moses, More Spirit Teachings* (London: Spiritualist Press, 1952), p.105.
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- (15) F. Podmore, *Modern Spiritualism* (London: Methuen, 1902), pp.287-288.
- (16) *Human Personality and its Survival of Bodily Death*, pp.260-262.
- (17) *The Experiences of W. Stainton Moses - I*, pp.343, 348.
- (18) H. Carrington, *The Physical Phenomena of Spiritualism* (London: T. Werner Laurie, 1907), p.15.
- (19) *The Experiences of W. Stainton Moses - II*, p.45.
- (20) *The Experiences of W. Stainton Moses - II*, pp.70-75.

NB.

Readers may be interested to read; "Spirit Teachings" By Stainton Moses; or alternatively, there is the more readable "More Spirit Teachings", again By Stainton Moses.