

William Fishbough Revealed as Author of *The Planchette Mystery*

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Note:

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Currently available from around thirty e-book purveyors is a 19th century Spiritualist work entitled *The Salem Witchcraft, the Planchette Mystery, and Modern Spiritualism, with Dr. Doddridge's Dream*, generally attributed (as by *Project Gutenberg* and *Amazon.com*) to 'Harriet Beecher Stowe and Phrenological Journal'. Other distributors either follow suit or credit the author as Harriet Beecher Stowe, the *Phrenological Journal*, or its publisher, Samuel R. Wells. In fact, this book is a compilation of four independent works previously printed in the *Phrenological Journal*, published together with added notes by S. R. Wells in May, 1872.¹ New editions were printed until at least 1886,² yet its proper authors have yet to be fully credited.

Within the book, 'The Salem Witchcraft' is attributed to 'the editor of "The Phrenological Journal"'³, i.e. Samuel R. Wells (1, 3). Harriet Beecher Stowe is credited as writing 'Modern Spiritualism', originally for the *Christian Union*;⁴ it was reprinted in the *Phrenological Journal* in 1870 (107). 'The Planchette Mystery' and 'Dr. Doddridge's Dream' are presented without authorial credit, and have been left as such for the last century and a half; thanks to the digitization efforts of Google Books, I have uncovered the author of the former.

Introduced to America in 1858,⁵ Planchette is a heart-shaped wooden board that stands on two casters and a pencil; a user would place his or her hands on it and ask a question aloud, and it would mysteriously write out its own answers.⁶ Mass produced and extremely popular, Planchette is an early example of the successful commodification of supernatural communication – as such it was the precursor of the fortune cookie, the Ouija board, and the Magic 8-Ball. At the height of the fad in 1868, Elizabeth Stuart Phelps wrote that 'to-day a counter without Planchette is a fossil', also noting the wide selection available

¹ 'Journal Miscellany: Ready May 1st', *The Phrenological Journal and Life Illustrated*, liv, 5 (May 1872), 3.

² Such as, for example, the edition hosted on archive.org.

³ *The Salem Witchcraft, the Planchette Mystery, and Modern Spiritualism, with Dr. Doddridge's Dream*, ed. S. R. Wells (New York, 1872).

⁴ 'Stowe typified her social strata's interest in mediumship, mesmerism, and spiritualism by her participation in séances and her experimentation with a planchette.' – Debra J. Rosenthal, *Performatively Speaking*, (Charlottesville, 2015), 88.

⁵ Brandon Hodge, 'G. W. Cottrell', *Mysterious Planchette*, n.d.. mysteriousplanchette.com/Manu_Portal/gwcottrell.html, (accessed 15 Nov. 2015).

⁶ 'My Acquaintance with Planchette', *The Native Virginian*, 7 August 1868, 1.

as well as its ubiquitous popularity.⁷ In July 1868, even *Scientific American* dedicated an article to investigating the device.⁸ Planchette had occasional resurgences throughout the 19th century.⁹ ‘The Planchette Mystery’ is valuable in part as a first-hand document of the great Planchette craze, complete with a review of contemporary press coverage and a comprehensive working-through of several popular theories about how the device operated (e.g. electricity, demonic forces, ghosts, etc.).

‘The Planchette Mystery’ began as an article published anonymously in the *Phrenological Journal*. In 1870, it was expanded¹⁰ to a full pamphlet credited to ‘A Truth-Seeker’, and advertised in the April issue of that year’s *Phrenological Journal*:

THE PLANCHETTE MYSTERY; An Inquiry into the Nature, Origin, Import, and Tendencies of Modern Signs and Wonders. How to Work Planchette. 25 cents. New York: S.R. Wells, Publisher.

Here are some recent notices of the little witch which we place on record.

The Church Independent, of La Porte, Indiana, says: “This is a very important pamphlet. The author conceals his name, but we happen to know him as a thorough-going philosopher and expounder of modern mysteries. He takes broad and scientific views’ ... (96)

Not all readers took the author’s anonymity as lightly as did the *Church Independent*’s reviewer. The *Phrenological Journal*’s Sept. 1870 issue includes the following correspondence:

DEAR MR. WELLS: You send me the following letter from a correspondent, and ask me what I have to say about it:

Near E. City, Pasquotank Co., N.C.

W. E. Wells—*Dear Sir*: Please send me June number P. Journal. * * * I admire you still. Never but one complaint—“The Planchette Mystery.’ Why intensify my curiosity? Promise a solution of a terrible mystery, and leave the

⁷ ‘They trundle in the windows of the tract-house and tobacco stores, dance among opera scores and Sunday school books ... Planchette confront[s] you at dancing parties and in the minister’s study, in the drawing room and in the “settin’ room” – is a substitute for the weather and Charles Dickens in the “social circle.”’ – Elizabeth Stuart Phelps, ‘Planchette’, *Watchman and Reflector*, 3 September 1868, 39.

⁸ ‘What is Planchette?’, *Scientific American*, xix, 2 (1868), 17–18.

⁹ ‘The mysterious little planchette board [...] is coming into fashion again’ – ‘A Scientific Puzzle Board’, *The Plattsburgh Sentinel*, 8 May 1885, 2. ‘The Planchette craze has broken out again’ – ‘Weird Writings’, *The Morning Call*, 14 November 1893, 8. See also Brandon Hodge, ‘The Second Coming, 1880–1910’, *Mysterious Planchette*, n.d., mysteriousplanchette.com/History/history3.html, (accessed 17 Nov. 2015).

¹⁰ ‘The pamphlet, which you published, and have for sale, contains several pages not printed in the *A. P. Journal*’ – William Fishbough, ‘What They Say: “The Planchette Mystery”’, *The Phrenological Journal & Packard’s Monthly*, iii, 3 (September 1870), 222.

mystery unexplained, and then bow yourself away from your excited, bewildered, and too confiding friend and victim with a polite—‘I withhold my name, and have nothing to say.’ Call you this *backing up*, or *deserting* your friends at the critical moment?

R.B.C.

If there be any ‘mystery’ still involved in this matter, which ought to be and can be explained, I suppose that I, as the author of the publication referred to, am responsible for it...

Of a lucubration intended solely to excite thought and reasoning, and which must necessarily stand or fall on its own merits, it was not deemed that the author’s name could be of any great consequence to the readers. But as this name appears to have been the subject of considerable inquiry, there is perhaps now no reason why I should not end this part of the mystery by subscribing myself, very respectfully,
WILLIAM FISHBOUGH. 54 SOUTH THIRD STREET, WILLIAMSBURGH, N.Y. (221)

The author of ‘The Planchette Mystery’ thus reveals himself as William Fishbough (1814–1881). Fishbough is remembered as ‘one of the first writers and speakers who took a public stand in favor of Spiritualism’.¹¹ A Universalist clergyman, he gained prominence by transcribing the otherworldly messages apparently received by clairvoyant teenage mystic Andrew Jackson Davis. In 1847, these messages were compiled into the influential *The Principles of Nature*.¹² His own book, *Macrocosm and Microcosm*, was published in 1852, followed by 1898’s posthumously published *The End of the Ages*.

Fishbough was a frequent contributor to Spiritualist periodicals¹³ and the *Phrenological Journal*, and he is notable for his adamancy that Christianity and Spiritualism tapped into the same divine truth. In ‘Ancient Christian Spiritualism’,¹⁴ Fishbough posited that ‘spiritual communion is the normal privilege of the true and faithful Christian Church’ and that ‘any true and really faithful Church of Christ will enjoy communion with good Spirits, with angels, and with God, as its normal and divinely appointed privilege’. This position was not unique,¹⁵ but came to alienate him from Davis and some other Spiritualists.¹⁶

‘The Planchette Mystery’ includes the purported transcript of an extended dialogue between the author and Planchette, and it is here that the work’s real purpose becomes clear:

¹¹ ‘The Spiritualists’ Directory’, *Spiritual Telegraph*, vi, 6 (6 June 1857), 2.

¹² L. Solentia, *The Review of Ancient and Modern Spiritualism*, (New York, 1862), I, 45.

¹³ I must mention the invaluable archives of the *International Association for the Preservation of Spiritualist and Occult Periodicals*, freely available at iapsop.com, which include the fully scanned and searchable contents of hundreds of Spiritualist resources, including *The Univercoelum*, which Fishbough edited in 1848-9.

¹⁴ William Fishbough, ‘Ancient Christian Spiritualism’, *The Spiritual Telegraph*, ii, 37 (14 January 1854), 1.

¹⁵ Sally Morita, ‘Unseen (and Unappreciated) Matters: Understanding the Reformatory Nature of 19th-Century Spiritualism’, *American Studies*, xl, 3 (1999), 99-125.

¹⁶ John B. Buescher, *The Other Side of Salvation*, (Boston, 2004), 36-7, 73-4.

Fishbough used this venue to further the views that he was already promulgating elsewhere, taking advantage of the Planchette fad to reach a wide audience. Writing as Planchette, Fishbough presents the illusion of supernatural support for his assertion that Christianity and Spiritualism are two parts of the same whole, and that Spiritualism in fact has a restorative effect upon Christianity:

P[lanchette]: ... I tell you now that the great object [of Spiritualism] is to purge the Church itself of its latent infidelity; to renovate the Christian faith; and to bring theology and religion up to that high standard which will be equal to the wants of this age, as it certainly now is not. (100)

With the author identified, we find this piece valuable not merely as an ephemeral work about the Planchette craze, but as an example of propaganda used by an influential Spiritualist to bolster his philosophical position by appeal to supernatural authorities, in a popular, easily-digestible form.

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