



The Davenport Brothers

Religious Practitioners, Entertainers, or Frauds?

They have become legendary in the history of spiritualism and continue to spark interest and controversy. The question persists: Were the Davenport Brothers “probably the greatest mediums of their kind that the world has ever seen,” as Sherlock Holmes’s creator Sir Arthur Conan Doyle wrote (1926, 226), or was magician Harry Houdini (1924, 26) correct in reporting that he had facts “more than sufficient to disprove their having, or even claiming, spiritualistic power”? My research into the recently discovered Davenport scrapbook sheds new light on these claims and the fierce disagreement they provoked between Doyle and Houdini.

The Davenports made their debut as mediums in 1854, six years after two schoolgirls, Maggie and Katie Fox, launched modern spiritualism at Hydesville, New York. No doubt the two Buffalo newsboys—thirteen-year-old William Henry Harrison Davenport (b. February 1, 1841) and his fifteen-year-old brother Ira Erastus (b. September 17, 1839)—had heard how the Fox sisters seemed to communicate with ghosts by means of mysterious rapping noises. The boys’ father, Ira D. Davenport, was the first to relate the strange happenings.

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Dishes and cutlery danced about the family’s kitchen table and young Ira—when alone—sometimes claimed the spirits had whisked him to distant spots. At household séances, the boys demonstrated their flying ability. As magician John Mulholland explained in his *Beware Familiar Spirits* (1938, 51): “That is, at the beginning of the séance Ira Erastus would be sitting on a chair at one side of the room, and when the lights were turned up after it was over, the chair and boy would be on the other side of the room.” This transpired in the dark, so credulous spectators simply assumed the youth had flown.

At the séances, the spirits supposedly also rapped out messages in the by-then-familiar way, but soon advanced to “automatic writing” (Bowers n.d., 155) which was supposedly produced by spirits guiding the entranced subject’s hand. Then the brothers’ spirit guide “George Brown,” found he could speak through Ira when the youth was in a “trance state” (Mulholland 1938, 49–50). Another spirit entity was “John King” who decided the boys should take their spirit demonstrations on the road.

In the halls and theaters rented by their father at the direction of “John King,” the Davenport Boys (as they were originally styled) began to give demonstrations of “spiritual manifestations.” To show that they were not physically responsible for the phenomena, they were tied to chairs placed

behind a curtain. Later the curtain was replaced by a specially designed “spirit cabinet” (Mulholland 1938, 52). This resembled a huge armoire with built-in benches on either side to which the boys were secured by lengths of rope (Jay 1987, 229; Houdini 1924, 21).

On the floor of the cabinet were placed musical instruments such as violins, guitars, concertinas, and tambourines. Then the doors were shut and the lights turned down. Soon, the instruments were heard to play, and phantom hands were seen to wave eerily through small diamond-shaped windows in the cabinet doors. When the gas lights were turned up and the cabinet opened, the Davenport boys were still securely tied. Spectators were divided over the manifestations; some believed, while others scoffed—or worse—and still others were simply mystified (Mulholland 1938, 53–54). In time the boys traveled throughout the United States and, as they matured, called themselves the Davenport Brothers. In 1864 they sailed for England where they “took the literati and public of London by storm” (Dawes 1979, 87) and performed throughout Europe.

On July 1, 1877, while the brothers were on tour in Australia, William Davenport, who had long been in ill health, died. Years later when Harry Houdini (1874–1926) was in Australia he visited William’s grave and, finding it in poor condition, had the stone work

repaired and flowers planted. Houdini subsequently visited Ira at his home in Mayville, New York, where Ira shared with him a lifetime of secrets (Houdini 1924, 17–25).

Ira spoke to Houdini as one magician to another, even revealing how he and his brother had extricated themselves from their bonds in order to produce the “spirit” effects. Houdini stated, “Ira Davenport positively disclaimed Spiritualistic power in his talk with me, saying repeatedly that he and his brother never claimed to be mediums or pretended their work to be Spiritualistic” (Houdini 1924, 26). Ira did admit that they never confessed the truth to their believing parents in order to spare their feelings. Years after Ira’s death (on July 8, 1911), Houdini included a chapter on the Davenports and Ira’s revelations in his *A Magician Among the Spirits* (1924, 17–37). Houdini included a facsimile of a letter from Ira claiming in regard to the brothers’ performances that “We never in public affirmed our Belief in spiritualism” (28).

By this time, Houdini’s friendship with Arthur Conan Doyle (1859–1930) was irreparably strained. Houdini had been debunking some of the very mediums Doyle had endorsed, and the latter had written to him: “Our relations are certainly curious and likely to become more so, for as long as you attack what I *know* from experience to be true I have no alternative but to attack you in turn. How long a private friendship can survive such an ordeal I do not know, but at least I did not create the situation.” Houdini did not help matters by publishing this and other excerpts from Sir Arthur’s letters (Houdini 1924, 164). [See also Massimo Polidoro, “Houdini and Conan Doyle: The Story of a Strange Friendship,” *SKEPTICAL INQUIRER*, March/April 1998.]

Subsequently, in his *The History of Spiritualism* (1926, I: 228), Doyle continued to debate Houdini: “It is to be

remarked that the Davenports themselves, as contrasted with their friends and travelling companions, never claimed any preternatural origin for their results.” But Doyle noted that Ira’s statement to Houdini only said the brothers had never “in public” affirmed belief in spiritualism, implying that *in private* Ira was indeed a spiritualist.



Ira Davenport with Houdini, 1910

Doyle went on to say that “As Mr. Houdini has seemed to question whether the Davenports themselves ever asserted that they were Spiritualists,” the matter was clarified by a letter they had written in 1868 to *The Banner of Light*, the leading American spiritualist journal. Regarding the claim they were not spiritualists, the brothers wrote:

It is singular that any individual, sceptic or Spiritualist, could believe such statements after fourteen years of the most bitter persecution and violent opposition, culminating in the riots of Liverpool, Huddersfield, and Leeds, where our lives were placed in imminent peril by the fury of brutal mobs, our property destroyed, and where we suffered a loss of seventy-five thousand dollars, and all because *we would not renounce Spiritualism*, and declare ourselves jugglers, when threatened by the mob, and urged to do so. In conclusion, we have only to say that we denounce all such state-

ments as falsehoods. (Quoted in Doyle 1926, II: 302)

Concerning Houdini’s claim that Ira Davenport had admitted his results were due to trickery, Doyle (1926, 228–229) said that “Houdini has himself stuffed so many errors of fact into his book . . . and has shown such extraordinary bias on the whole question, that his statement carries no weight. The letter which he produces makes no such admission.” Doyle insisted that the Davenports “were never exposed, nor even adequately imitated.” Again he said, “There can be no question at all, to anyone who has really weighed the facts, that Ira Davenport was a true medium” (Doyle 1930, 23, 45). Astonishingly, Doyle even suggested that Houdini himself might have had mediumistic powers!

That bizarre notion aside, the question remains: Were the Davenport brothers indeed spiritualists rather than mere “jugglers”—a position Doyle advanced (1926, II: 302)? Or is that a false dichotomy, a limited choice between two views with the truth lying elsewhere? A scrapbook that has recently surfaced helps to settle this continuing controversy.

I first saw the scrapbook on one of my visits to Lily Dale Assembly, the “World’s Largest Center for the Religion of Spiritualism” (as the entrance sign proclaims). I was taking some colleagues on a tour, and in the museum I spied the scrapbook in a display case. It had recently been discovered in a storage area and recognized as a significant find. Later, I was able to study it as part of a three-day stay at Lily Dale, August 7–9, 1998.

It contained several flourished signatures that compare favorably (making allowances for variations over time) with the “Ira E Davenport” signature on the January 19, 1909, letter to Houdini (previously mentioned). There are also apparent signatures of his brother—“Wm Davenport” and “Mr. William Davenport”—although I had no known

specimens for comparison. The scrapbook may have been shared by the brothers, but it appears to have been largely kept by Ira and, after William's death in 1877, became solely Ira's while falling largely into disuse.

Most significantly, the scrapbook contains evidence in favor of both Doyle's and Houdini's views. First, there are several indications that Ira Davenport was indeed an avowed spiritualist. For example, there is the obituary of his infant son and first wife who died in childbirth. Headed "Passed to Spirit Life" (and datelined "Adrian [Michigan], June 29, 1863"), it was very likely written by Ira. It said of his unnamed but "accomplished and beautiful wife": "Possessing a highly refined and cultivated mind and fully realizing the importance of the great truths of Spiritualism, she exercised an elevated influence over her husband in properly directing his energies and mediumistic powers, for the advancement of the facts of immortality." The scrapbook also contains some clippings of sentimental verse, one asking "Is Life Eternal" and answering in the affirmative, another telling a dead lover that "You will be my guardian here."

More evidential are penciled "spirit" writings that appear on some of the early pages. These are scrawled, smeared, overwritten, stained, and otherwise difficult to read. There seems little of interest but one phrase declares, "connected with/with [sic] spirit manifesting." The writing may be an early form of Ira's handwriting. It is very likely from the 1850s, at which time Ira was practicing "automatic" writing (Bowers n.d., 155).

In addition, there is a suggestive annotation which Ira signed with his initials. It follows a brief, undated clipping about the Davenport Brothers' impending trial at Centerville, Indiana. The charge was unstated but may have been "showing without a license" which (as demonstrated by another clipping) they were charged with at Ionia, Michigan, in September 1860. To the Indiana journalist's sarcastic comment, "the spirits will help them out of their difficulties, of course," Ira responded by

writing, "And they did. I.E.D." The comment is ambiguous. Taken literally it suggests Ira believed he received spirit aid. Or he might have meant that spirits became a mitigating religious issue, which actually happened at Ionia; there spiritualists testified "that the demonstrations given by the Davenport boys were some of the methods which Spiritualists use for disseminating their religious belief."

The Ionia trial provides still additional evidence that bears on Ira's relationship to spiritualism. The brothers had given what one journalist disparaged as "an exhibition of their skill in hemp handling" (i.e., rope tricks) on each of eight successive evenings at a spiritualist assemblage held at nearby Lyons. The article mentioned that "the Spiritualists which number many of our most substantial citizens, felt much aggrieved because of the prosecution." The Davenport Brothers' participation in the "Lyons Spiritual Convention" suggests they were—or were pretending to be—practicing spiritualists.

A clipping from the *Brighton Herald* of December 17, 1864, confirms what is known from other sources, that the Davenport Brothers were accompanied during the early part of their overseas tour by the Reverend J. B. Ferguson, a Presbyterian who became an ardent and eloquent proponent of spirit manifestations and who served as a lecturer with the Davenports' show. By all accounts he had a "minister's simple faith" in the genuineness of the brothers' mediumship (Mulholland 1938, 56, 62). Doyle's insistence that the Davenports were actually spiritualists was based in part on Ferguson. Doyle stated that if Ira claimed otherwise then he was "not only a liar, but a blasphemer as he went around with Mr. Ferguson, a clergyman, and mixed it all up with religion" (Quoted in Houdini 1924, 148).

Even the fact that the scrapbook was discovered at Lily Dale, where it had obviously been for many years, is highly suggestive of Ira's ties to spiritualism. In fact, at an 1885 spiritualist "Camp Meeting" there, Ira Davenport was one of two featured "physical mediums" (those who produced physical phenom-

ena). In reporting on the event, *The Banner of Light* (August 29, 1885) stated that Ira's "fame in this phase of mediumship is world wide."

All of this evidence from the scrapbook indicates Ira Davenport identified himself as a spiritualist as Doyle insisted. (So did Ira's obituary in the July 9, 1911, *New York Times*, which specifically referred to him as a "spiritualist." And his tombstone has a religious, compatibly spiritualistic, message, depicting a rising sun with the words, "There never was night that had no morn.")

On the other hand, it is Houdini whom the scrapbook vindicates regarding the Davenport Brothers' demonstrations. In clipping after clipping there is evidence that supports his claim that—as he said Ira admitted to him—the brothers secretly performed the "spirit" effects by slipping free of their bonds. For example, according to an unidentified clipping, circa 1857–1858:

[A] printer of this city visited the boys and taking along a little printer's ink, after seeing that the boys were firmly tied, placed it on the neck of the violin. He placed quite a quantity there, and the result was that soon the spirit "John" ["John King"], called through the old tin trumpet for a light, as he had been daubing the boys all over with *paint!* When the light was brought it was found that one of the boys, sure enough, had his shoulder pretty well besmeared. Of course the manager stoutly contended that it was placed there by the spirit, but our printer friend was of the opinion that "John" was rather an ignorant spirit if he did not know *printers ink* from *paint!*

The newspaper continued, saying of the Davenports' performance, "The whole thing is a trick; but it is a clever one. . . ."

A similar exposé occurred in Indiana in 1863 as reported in the May 22 issue of the *Richmond Palladium* in an article titled, "The Celebrated Davenport Boys Brought to Grief." A Dr. Henry Davis "applied oil of kerosene to the handle of the [violin] bow, and as soon as the musical part of the manifestations was over, the hands of the 'mediums' were examined and the odor of the oil was found quite perceptible on the right

hand" of one of the brothers. It was therefore he, said the paper, "who had been making the 'spirit music' with which the audience had been edified," and the brothers were thus "convicted . . . of that part of the swindle." They refused to be tested further, whereupon "a crowd of one or two hundred persons rushed upon the stage" and demanded a refund from the Davenports. "Their box, horns, violins, banjos, etc., were pretty roughly kicked about the stage." When patrons were promised a refund from the ticket office but found it closed, "A large crowd now assembled in the street and demanded to know the whereabouts of the swindlers. . . ." Peace was only restored by an appeal to law and order. The brothers and their two associates were arrested and charged with "obtaining money under false pretenses." After posting bond, "the swindlers," said the paper, were "turned loose to prosecute still further their nefarious thieving operations. . . ."

Another clipping reported that at the previously mentioned trial at Ionia, Michigan, in 1860, a committeeman had been placed with the brothers in the spirit cabinet. He testified that, in the dark, "he secured between his knees one of the instruments the spirits were said to play on, and . . . after jerking it several times and finding it fast, one of them [the brothers] said in a low voice, 'don't hold it so fast.'" As well, "several witnesses testified to what appeared to them signs of humbuggery" which were "such that darkness was required to do them in. . . ."

Two clippings (one from the *Detroit Free Press*, the other from the Clearwater, Michigan, *Democratic Union*) describe a revealing exposé of November 1860. On a Sunday afternoon the brothers gave one of their exhibitions where, as usual, "permission was given for any person who wished to do so to examine the 'boys' and satisfy themselves that there was no deception about the matter." Thereupon (continued the *Free Press*), "One or two persons took advantage of the permission given, and commencing the search, discovered some of their implements of trade concealed in the boot of one of

the performers."

The brothers announced that no further searching would be permitted but, when the searchers persisted, "a general *melee* ensued, during which one of the Davenports drew a bowie-knife or dirk and threatened to kill any person who should lay hands on him." This ended the exhibition and resulted in charges being placed against the brothers. "The one arrested for assault," reported the *Democratic Union*, was subsequently acquitted, after which "the whole were tried" for "exhibiting on the Sabbath" and convicted. Rather than pay a \$25 fine each, they elected to serve a 30-day jail term.

Still another scrapbook clipping (unidentified but dated March 24, 1865) tells how two aggressive English skeptics, a Mr. Hulley and Mr. Cummins, "took an active part . . . in baffling the spiritualistic pretensions of the Brothers." Details are not given (although in similar instances reported elsewhere [McHargue 1972, 131-3] the Davenports were stymied when they were tied especially securely). As a result, several persons sought to recover their five-shilling admission fee on the grounds that the brothers failed to perform what their sponsors had promised in their advertisements.

Taken as a whole, the evidence of the scrapbook does indicate that Ira Davenport was a practicing spiritualist,

or at least pretended to be, although he and his brother used trickery to accomplish the effects they attributed to spirits. Clearly they were career deceivers who (according to Ira's obituary) "made a fortune of \$600,000" before William's untimely death and Ira's subsequent retirement. In his old age, Ira's qualms about their dishonesty probably prompted him to make some atonement by confessing the brothers' secrets to Houdini while, at the same time, trying to present their actions in the most favorable light.

Acknowledgments

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