I made several attempts at locating some of the relatives of the medium “Margery,” whose role was so prominent when Houdini and Conan Doyle were friends—and later enemies.

Massimo Polidoro: Anna, I must say that I am an admirer of Margery and I think that the idea of her faking the phenomena was probably more a matter of a difficult relationship with her husband than an attempt to deceive the public. What do you think?

Anna Thurlow: Please, do not feel any anxiety over offending me regarding whether she was “authentic” or not—I do not believe in supernatural phenomena. I am, however, fascinated with the pageantry and ritual of it. I know that for whatever reason she started it (and I agree with you, I do not think it was with intent to deceive but rather for reasons more psychologically complex), it conquered her mentally in the end—after Dr. Crandon died (even though he was my great-grandfather, we’ve always called him “Dr. Crandon”) she
continued automatic writing on her own, as if it was the only company she had, which I find very sad.

MP: Did you have a chance when you were a kid to know Mina personally?

AT: I never knew Mina, nor did my mother, as Mina drank herself to death so early on. But my grandfather John Crandon (Mina’s son and my mother’s father) was greatly influenced and shaped by her. He was a very unhappy man and both obsessed with and ashamed by her. She was rarely spoken of in the family but my mother gathered many stories and passed them on to me. I’ve been worried about the veracity of the stories, but where I’ve been able to verify them, they’ve turned out to be true. More immediately, however, the psychological impact of my great-grandparent’s dysfunctionality and the conflict with Houdini was deeply imprinted on the family.

MP: Is John still living?

AT: Yes, my grandfather is still living although not mentally competent; even before, however, he rejected anyone’s attempt to contact the family— which is why you wouldn’t have been able to find any of us. My mother, on the other hand, was fascinated by Mina and was preparing to write a book about women, spirituality, and class in Boston, with Mina as the central figure. My mom died of cancer in 1995, just before Ken’s book came out—she would have been thrilled to read it, as he uncovered so much more than we knew. I’ve been very grateful to him for answering so many of the questions that my grandfather never would. There is only myself and my mother’s brother.

MP: It must not have been easy for a kid like John, your grandfather, to live in a house were all those strange things went on. What did he think about his mother’s fame?

AT: It made my grandfather very angry to talk about Mina (the Rand side of the family only knew her as Mina, people outside of the family or Houdini specialists always refer to her as Margery; my mother and I refer to her as both). I asked him several years ago what he thought about the whole thing, and he said that he knew when she started the séances that something was not right with her, mentally. However a few minutes later he turned to me and said in a way that made my hair stand on end: ‘They didn’t know what they were playing with. It was a very dangerous game.’ His room at 10 Lime street was right next to the séance room, and he could hear everything. They locked him in every night (as well as the servants) to prove to the siters that the séance circle was controlled. I think he was around twelve years old. So I imagine, for him, however much a rationalist he was, it must have nonetheless been absolutely terrifying. Seeing him re-live that was chilling enough for me to not ask again. My mother told me that the public outcry on this arrangement was such that Mina had to send my grandfather away; which they did—to Andover (a boarding school). When I asked him once about how it was done, he said, ‘mirrors.’ But he didn’t explain more than that.

MP: Did you have other chances to talk about Mina with John?

AT: I’ve asked my grandfather about Mina over my whole life, but he really didn’t like to talk about it. The conversation I relayed to you took place in 1997, I think, just before he really slipped mentally; he must have been in his early eighties, and I was in my late twenties. The question about the mirrors was the same day—I asked him if he believed in it (no) how they did it (mirrors) and how he felt about being in the room next door (wouldn’t say). He was very rattled and the nurse told me that he had nightmares all that night. Sid Radner (of the Houdini séances) was very interested in talking with him, but after that, I really felt that he couldn’t remember enough for it to be worth the emotional turmoil it obviously caused him.

MP: Dr. Crandon died in 1939 and Mina in 1941, however we know that she went into depression and drank quite heavily. What were those two years alone like for her?

AT: After Dr. Crandon died Mina had an affair with their lawyer, Mr. Button, and I believe she moved in with him in New York City. However, my mother and grandmother (my grandmother was rather horrified by the whole thing and never really knew how to handle Mina) always hated him. I am not sure why but I think my grandfather felt Button stole her money or he otherwise took advantage of her. Button certainly supported her continued ‘experiments’ so I wouldn’t be surprised if he was hoping to recreate some of the notoriety of before. However, I haven’t found a thing about him that confirms that he was a bad person, so I have to reserve my judgment. But Mina did drink herself to death by her early fifties (although the toll of drink and depression, as I gather, made her seem much, much older). But yes, my grandfather was terribly ashamed of her, as I think most children of alcoholics are, even without having had the whole world know very intimate things about her. By the time she died, my grandfather was already married.

MP: Could this Button you are referring to be W.H. Button, the then-President of the American Society for Psychical Research?

AT: You are right! I was shocked to realize that he was the head of the ASPR—my mother had thought he was a lawyer. All of the papers I have from later in Mina’s life were archived, sorted, and stored by him—the envelopes all have his name and address on them. I am now curious as to what date he starts the archiving as opposed to Dr. Crandon. I never really thought about it, but Dr. Crandon’s papers seem to peter out around 1926 (presumably around the time that Dr. Crandon no longer believed in Margery?) even though he didn’t die until 1938. I wonder if Button “took up the cause” and perhaps that is how Mina and he became involved with each other. She moved to New York to be with him. Coincidentally, she lived on W. 116th street, and of course Houdini had lived on W. 113th street. My mother and I also lived on W. 113th street for almost fifteen years, only two blocks away!

MP: Since you are talking about houses: While on my search for material and information for my book I went to Boston and tried to locate the house where Mina lived and where the famous séances with Houdini and the Scientific American team took place. However, due also to time constraints, I was not able to find it. Does the house still exist, I wonder?

AT: Yes, 10 Lime street is still there. I have written to the owners to ask if I could meet them but they’re never responded. My mother was born there and I’d like to see it for personal history, but no luck. I am dying to find out if they found any secret passages, etc. As an interesting note, the photo of her most often reproduced (standing in a doorway) was actually of the building next door. 10 Lime doesn’t have a recessed doorway. I understand that the photo was taken by Houdini, and I saw a note somewhere asking
him to keep that fact rather secret, for fear of their "reputations"—I presume to keep it a secret that they actually got along long enough to take a picture! I do suspect that they were quite similar in the aspect of having been hard working class and yet outsmarted a lot of very self-satisfied people. Plus they each had some aspect of themselves that society used to dismiss them—he being Jewish and her being female. Neither of which were qualities held in high value by many of the participants, from what I can tell.

MP: Was Houdini and the Scientific American investigation ever talked about in your family?

AT: I didn't know anything about the Scientific American episode other than it had been a scandal, until I read Ken's book. Houdini was a respected name in the household but his name also held a great aura of sadness and shame. I remember my mother telling me that when the Boston Globe stated that Houdini announced her to be a fraud, my grandfather went out and bought all of the newspapers so that Mina wouldn't read it. While I agree with Houdini that one can only explain the séances as a combination of theater and audience participation, the séances he was at were pretty simple. I would really like to know how they managed the more complicated séance events. I also don't feel that Houdini was quite up front himself—he seemed to be playing his own games. However, he was treated terribly by Dr. Crandon and some of the others and that pretty much entitles Houdini to act however he wanted, to my mind.

MP: You said that after 1926, Dr. Crandon presumably no longer believed in Margery. What do you think of him? Did he help her in some of her trickery or was he really a complete believer?

AT: I think Dr. Crandon must have been convinced of the experiments—I don't think anyone can write so consistently to intimate friends for so many years and have it be a lie. I think that Conan Doyle (whose friendship was dearly valued by my great-grandparents) and Dr. Crandon truly thought they were foraging at the frontiers of science, as strange as that seems now. . . . I take Bird's testimony regarding a sexual relationship with a grain of salt. He strikes me as a rather charming but unbalanced and not entirely trustworthy person—tragic, too—as he disappeared (from what I know) after all this . . . probably not a person it would be wise to get too intimately involved with. Would she even dare get involved with such a person, if her highest priority was to keep Dr. Crandon happy? Of course, relationships do not always make sense, but Bird sets off alarm bells even for me, eighty years later.

MP: As with many of those who have studied the Margery story and the Scientific American investigation, you don't seem to have a great opinion of Malcolm Bird.

AT: I think he was a rather duplicitous person himself. He basically moved into 10 Lime street, and I suspect may have been given money by my great-grandparents (although I can't prove that)—there is just a reference to a blank check to him from Mina, to which he teases her: "what would it look like if certain people saw this?" and there may have been plenty of personal reasons for them to all grow quite tired of each other's company. I find, however, I am quite curious to know what happened to him. He strikes me as a rather sad person as well, not quite able to handle the demands of the situation he found himself in . . . although I suppose the situation got the better of most of the participants . . . By the way, the picture in your book of Mina in the doorway is the picture I was referring to earlier. I believe it was taken by Houdini and she asked him not to reveal that fact (a collector at one of the Houdini séances showed me the same picture and told me Houdini had taken it, and I have a copy of a letter from Mina asking Houdini not to tell anyone he was the one who took pictures of her). It is of her standing in the doorway of 11 Lime, not 10 Lime.

MP: On reading about the story from some of the original documents, what do you think now of Dr. Crandon's role and character?

AT: I'm pretty sure I know what Dr. Crandon's problems at the hospitals were—women. He was a philanderer. I suspect that in combination with too many sexual escapades with the female staff, he was argumentative with his peers. Plus I think Ken Silverman may have mentioned that Dr. Crandon was not as wealthy as he appeared to be. This also makes sense to me, as he had several previous wives and was likely to have some financial pressures on that end, which may have complicated things. There have been disappointments for me in learning more about my great-grandfather; he was a racist and a sexist. (My grandfather inherited those traits. However the both of them hid it fairly well under the veneer of upperclass manners and propriety, but when pushed or angered, you can see it, and it is ugly.) But there have also been two things of which I am surprised to say I am rather proud: one, he was staunchly atheist and did not let social mores pressure him into believing certain things—I believe his belief in spiritualism to be genuine, and to be based in a combination of hope and science, but not in religion. That must have made his disappointment later all that more devastating. The second thing I am proud of him for is mentioned in your last chapter. I don't know that he assisted women with abortions for a fact, but I had heard it before, and it makes sense to me, and I am proud to think that one of my ancestors did something like that gave women more autonomy over themselves, particularly in the time when women had so few choices. Sexism I find not an absolute quality but exists by degrees. and although I think he thought of women as less capable than men, I think he also thought women should have some autonomy over their bodies or minds. To his credit, he warmly welcomed my grandmother into the family—a doctor herself, and the only woman to graduate from McGill Medical School in 1939.

MP: Thank you for sharing with our readers your very interesting thoughts and comments on one of the greatest historical figures in the history of psychological research.

When the Boston Globe stated that Houdini announced Margery to be a fraud, my grandfather went out and bought all of the newspapers so that she wouldn't read it.