

Barbanell's Own Obituary

Maurice Barbanell, always a keen journalist, prepared his own obituary. Who could better tell this fascinating story? It also affords the reader the opportunity to compare his writing style with that of Silver Birch.

I have been told that my psychic story really begins in a previous incarnation of which I have no knowledge. Red Cloud, the guide of Estelle Roberts, who gave me my finest evidence of individual Survival after death, and in whose séance room "Psychic News" was born, said I had made a promise in a former existence. This was to reincarnate and devote my life to spreading Spiritualism.

So far as I am aware my psychic story started undramatically at a meeting of the Ghetto Social and Literary Club in London's East End. I was the unpaid secretary with a twofold task.

It was my job to obtain, without fee, famous literary and artistic figures to speak on a variety of subjects, a feat I achieved with success. This was mostly because these eminent authors were intrigued to find cultural yearnings in London's darkest East End.

My other task was, irrespective of what the speaker said, to lead the opposition so as to ensure a good discussion. My colleagues always told me that I managed to excel in this direction.

During my secretary ship some friends invited me to be present at a séance, the first I had ever attended. Only when it ended did they tell me it was a mock affair staged for fun. Nevertheless, as a teenager it produced subconsciously an antagonism to Spiritualism.

Like so many young men I had abandoned orthodox religion. My mother was devoutly religious. My father was an atheist who steadfastly refused to accompany her to any orthodox services despite her lament that his absence would shock their friends.

In my youth I heard so many arguments about religion between my parents, in which incidentally my father always won, that I adopted his atheism, which later changed to agnosticism.

It is necessary to mention this personal background to set the scene for what followed. One night at our social and literary club there was no eminent speaker. Instead our guest was a young man named Henry Sanders, who spoke about his experiences in Spiritualism. When he finished my colleagues turned to me for my usual opposing opening speech from the floor.

I surprised them. Despite my then fairly recent mock séance attendance, I said this was a subject on which only those with experience could venture any worthwhile opinions. As I had made no personal investigation my opinions were, therefore, valueless. Naturally the rest of the evening was not a hectic one for discussion.

When it was over Sanders approached me. Was I serious, he asked, in my statement that only those with experience based on inquiry should venture to declare their views? If so, was I prepared to investigate?

“Yes,” I replied. Moreover I would reach no conclusion until I had spent six months on this quest. I still have the diary in which I noted the date when the six months would end. Here I am, a half a century later, still inquiring.

Sanders invited me to attend a home circle which met in a nearby tenement. The date was arranged. I went accompanied by Sylvia, who was then my fiancée and now my wife. The circle in this dingy block was composed of a mixture of young and old Jews who all seemed earnest though unprepossessing.

The medium, a middle-aged woman, Mrs Blaustein, was said to go into trance. In that state, I was told, entities belonging to differing nationalities would control and speak through her.

This happened, but did not impress me. So far as I could tell, there was no evidence which would satisfy me that these indeed were “dead” foreigners speaking through her lips.

Nevertheless in view of my promise I presented myself at the second sitting where a similar demonstration by her was given. It seemed to me that at one stage of the proceedings I fell asleep, either through boredom or being tired. When I woke I apologised. I was told to my surprise, “You have been a Red Indian.”

It was my first mediumistic trance, but what happened was a complete blank to me. Nevertheless the guide known as Silver Birch had broken formidable earth barriers and spoke a few words in a husky and almost guttural voice. It is far different from what I am assured are the simple but eloquent tones that so many have now heard.

The sequel was the formation of my own home circle where the Silver Birch entity gradually developed as his control became a seemingly simple process of merging his individuality with mine. There were degrees of awareness in this unfolding process of my mediumistic development. I was not keen on the trance condition, probably through my vanity in wanting to know what was said and done through my bodily mechanism.

At one stage there was a fascinating happening. As I lay in bed on the night after sitting, everything that had been said through me unrolled on a kind of cinema screen so that I became familiar with all that the others had heard.

This no longer obtains because of the intervention of Hannen Swaffer, the famous journalist, whom I came to know intimately. Our association began when we spent three years addressing public meetings all over Britain, to audiences totalling 250,000, at weekends. Sometimes there were two and even three meetings on one day.

Always we travelled by car from London on the Saturday morning; often we returned in the early hours of Monday. The meetings had to be held at weekends because of my commercial life, which virtually ended when “Psychic News” was launched in 1932. Then my association with Swaffer took another form.

He was intrigued by my trance mediumship and came to love Silver Birch. Swaffer said the guide’s teachings were being wasted as they were heard only by a handful of people. As a natural propagandist he wanted them to be disseminated, reaching the largest possible number of people, and thought the perfect vehicle was “Psychic News.”

I demurred. Obviously, I said, I would be open to criticism by publicising my own mediumship in the newspaper I edited. Finally, after much argument, I agreed to do so, provided my identity was withheld.

There was another problem to be solved. The guide was then known, as he still is to a few intimates, by a nickname which was deemed unsuitable for publication. He was asked to choose one for this purpose. Silver Birch was his selection.

The next morning, in my office, the mail included a postcard from Scotland with no name or address of the sender, but with a splendid photograph of Silver Birch trees on it.

The teachings of what was called, as it still is, Hannen Swaffer's home circle regularly appeared in "Psychic News." Curiosity was constantly aroused as to the medium's identity which for long was kept secret.

Swaff, however, brought so many visitors from among his famous friends that I felt the stage was reached when the mystery should be ended. I wrote an article announcing that I was Silver Birch's medium.

I should mention in passing that, when you work in a confectionery factory, you soon lose your taste for sweets. And when you are an editor you are not attracted by publicity as too many humans are.

The Silver Birch teachings have been recorded by two shorthand writers. The first was Billy Austen, then my assistant editor. His place was taken by Frances Moore, who still acts as "the scribe," the name by which the guide always calls her. Occasionally the séances have been tape-recorded. There are several of these recordings obtainable today. Once even a gramophone record was made for public sale.

Because all the sessions were being reported in shorthand, I was asked if I would forego the practice of having the proceedings recalled for me later in bed. It was explained that an expenditure of psychic power became involved. I agreed.

To test the state of trance Silver Birch once asked Swaff to stick pins into me. Though blood was drawn I felt nothing. There are critics calling themselves psychic researchers who dismiss guides as the medium's secondary personalities. I am aware of all the problems involved in trance mediumship. Mainly they stem from the fact that a guide has to control the medium's subconscious mind.

This, unlike a telephone, is a living thing and, therefore, is bound to colour to some extent whatever is transmitted from the spirit world. Development consists in obtaining mastery over the subconscious mind.

In my working life I use words every day. I have never yet written or dictated an article with which I was satisfied when I read it. Inevitably I find, when looking at the typed material, that I can improve it by altering words, phrases and sentences.

No such problem arises with the guide's teachings. These flow perfectly, requiring usually only commas, semicolons or full stops. Another interesting aspect is the occasional use of words that I regard as archaic and do not form part of my normal vocabulary.

Silver Birch's distinctive and separate individuality — I believe there is a spiritual relationship — has been proved to me and to my wife many times. In the early days we had what was probably our most remarkable evidence.

He told Sylvia that in connection with a certain matter which presented a seemingly insoluble problem to us both, he would provide an answer. At the time we both attended the regular direct voice sittings of Estelle Roberts. Silver Birch said at the next one he would speak through the trumpet to Sylvia and mentioned the words he would say.

Of course Estelle was told nothing about this. You can imagine how curious we were to see what would happen. Estelle's guide, Red Cloud, was obviously in the picture because of the references he made that only Sylvia and I understood.

As the perfect master of spirit ceremonies he staged the matter admirably by keeping us waiting almost to the end. Then he said to Sylvia that the next communicator was for her. In the darkness on which Red Cloud always insisted, the phosphorescent trumpet moved towards her. Through it spoke Silver Birch and repeated the words he had promised to pronounce.

Evidence of separate identity came frequently in another circle where I sat regularly. Here with a non-professional medium named Nena Mayer we always had the direct voice. It was fascinating for me after Silver Birch had spoken through me in trance to hear him communicating through the trumpet.

There are other occasions I could mention, but one more will suffice. A Fleet Street editor was bereaved when his son was killed in the last war. Without mentioning his name I asked Estelle whether he could be invited to a voice séance.

She replied by reminding me that the rule was that only those whom Red Cloud had agreed should be there could come. I said I would leave it and ask him when next we met.

The following day she telephoned me to say that Silver Birch had appeared to her and pleaded for my friend to be invited. So she agreed. Needless to say the "dead" son communicated to him and to his wife.