

THE RELUCTANT SPIRITUALIST: THE LIFE OF MAGGIE FOX by Nancy Rubin
Stuart. Orlando, FL: Harcourt, 2005. Pp. xiii + 393. \$25.00 (hardback).
ISBN 0-15-101013-7.

In 1848, in the town of Hydesville, New York, not far from Rochester, the sounds of disembodied rappings were produced in the presence of Maggie and Katy Fox, and then of their older sister Leah. These sounds were promoted as having been made by spirits telegraphing communications to the living and did more than anything else to precipitate "modern Spiritualism" from the religious atmosphere of the time.

Recently three books have been published on the Fox sisters, suddenly filling in a gap of three decades since the last substantial biography of the Foxes appeared. Nancy Rubin Stuart's book is the latest, but the previous year saw the publication of Barbara Weisberg's *Talking to the Dead: Kate and Maggie Fox and the Rise of Spiritualism* and David Chapin's *Exploring Other Worlds: Margaret Fox, Elisha Kent Kane, and the Antebellum Culture of Curiosity*. All three appear to have been in production at the same time. None of them refers to the others.

The similarities between Stuart's book and Weisberg's are strong. The authors received help in their research from many of the same people and consulted many of the same sources. Each of these authors is a former television producer who felt drawn to one of the Fox sisters—in Stuart's case, to Maggie; in Weisberg's, to Katy. Nevertheless, each of the books portrays the Fox sisters and their relatives and friends in a different light. While Weisberg's book is focused on the entire Fox family and on the growth of spiritualism, Stuart's places Maggie Fox in the center and spends less time on the other members of the Fox family and on the larger history of spiritualism. In Stuart's book, Maggie (Margaretta) is the instigator of the rappings; in Weisberg's, it is Katy (Catherine). Stuart portrays Maggie as a tragic figure and has Katy as a clever but less sympathetic character. She describes the girls' mother, Margaret, as naïve, soft, and permissive. The girls' father John, she says, was a shiftless drunkard who deserted the family after Leah's birth but then reformed himself into a humorless, teetotal Methodist, rejoined his family, and sired Maggie and Katy.

In Stuart's book, the girls' older sister Leah (Ann Leah) is a relentless, ambitious impresario of her younger sisters, careless of their welfare, responsible not only for turning them into puppets under her control but also for being the "leading force behind the rise of American spiritualism." For Stuart, Maggie's story as a spirit medium is that of her struggle for autonomy against her older sister and against her enthusiastic public.

The particular strength of Stuart's book over all others is her detailed portrayal of the relationship of Maggie to her suitor and (perhaps) husband, Arctic explorer Elisha Kane. For previous biographers, Kane was simply a cad who compromised Maggie. He never had the courage or perhaps even the inclination to marry her but led her on because of his thoughtless fascination with the wild mystery of her powers and his insouciant conviction, born out of his family's social status, that he would tame her as if she were a wild animal.

Stuart, however, analyzing the same letters between the two lovers that other biographers have used, sees irony, playfulness, and mutual regard. She suggests that Maggie and Elisha were equally matched in some sense, pointing to Maggie's letters in which she counters Kane's disapproval of her mediumship by listing some of the intellectuals and scientists who had come out in favor of spiritualism. Stuart's treatment of the lovers' relationship is

complex and persuasive, making it easy to understand why Maggie would have fallen in love with Elisha, as well as why his death left her unreconciled to her future without him. Stuart's assessment of character and motive is more complex and consistent than that of previous biographers. She also ventures into considering Maggie's conversion to Catholicism and how this affected her spiritualist practices.

Stuart's book, however, sometimes moves out of its narrative of the Fox sisters' lives into a broader picture of spiritualism and of the religious movements of the time, but when it does, it suffers from mistakes. Stuart says twice that Emma Hardinge married ex-Universalist minister and spiritualist author and editor Samuel Byron Brittan, and she gives Brittan's middle name as "Bryan." In fact, Emma married physician William Britten.

Stuart calls Charles Chauncey Burr "Reverend" but puts quotes around the word, as if his credentials were questionable. But he was indeed a Universalist minister, although no longer making his living as such when he began his anti-rapping crusade. She calls his brother "Raymond," but his name was Heman. She gives Daniel Dunglas Home's middle name as "Douglas." She refers to Ira Davenport as "John." She misspells Alfred Russel Wallace's middle name as "Russell." She mentions that Abraham Lincoln attended a séance given by medium Nettie Colburn Maynard, but Nettie did not become Mrs. Maynard until some years afterward. In the bibliography, Stuart links *Ballou's Pictorial* to Adin Ballou rather than to Maturin Ballou. She cites Benjamin Hatch's book as *Spiritualists' Iniquities Unmasked* rather than *Spiritualists' Iniquities Unmasked*. She describes the spiritualists' memorial to Congress in 1854 asking for an investigation into the rappings but does not seem to realize that the petitioners believed they had been betrayed by Senator Shield's mockery of the subject.

Stuart needed a more attentive editor. Typos appear—there is one even in the first sentence of chapter 1. And there are points of imprecision. She writes that "to literalists, spiritualism's true spark came in 1848 from something no more or less powerful than a bored teenage girl." But "literalists" is surely not the right word. She writes that several doctors "who ascribed [sic] to the healing claims of Andrew Jackson Davis, had become spiritualist converts," but should have used "adhered" or "subscribed" instead of "ascribed."

Stuart repeatedly describes those who, beginning in 1848, were interested in the Fox sisters' rappings and in forming spirit circles as converting to "spiritualism" or as becoming "spiritualists." But, apart from John Bovee Dods's idiosyncratic use of the word "spiritualism" to designate the psychological states he induced in his mesmeric subjects in the early 1840s or the older use of the word to mean simply something like "religion," "mysticism," or the opposite of "materialism," the word "spiritualism" was not used before 1852. Only after the rappings had been linked with the evolutionary cosmology and "harmonial philosophy" of Andrew Jackson Davis and various radical Universalists and Quakers was

this later amalgamation given the name "spiritualism" and its adherents called "spiritualists."

Unlike Weisberg, who sometimes seems diffident about her material, as if she were floating just above the narrative, presenting details but unwilling to say not only what we ought to make of the girls' characters but also what actually happened, Stuart places the reader into the characters she has struggled to understand and whose inner motivations she has sought to make coherent and lively. One may wonder, however, whether any biographer of the Foxes will ever have enough material about the girls' early years and the events at Hydesville to offer a completely confident assessment of them.

Has the key to the Fox girls' characters been found? Stuart, like Weisberg, is dissatisfied with earlier interpretations of the girls' motives and actions that blame them for simple fraud, although both admit that the girls, even when young, were high-spirited and mischievous. Stuart is not sympathetic to the spirit hypothesis but still warms to the girls as feminist heroes, as strugglers for personal autonomy under oppression.

Nevertheless, even if we simply take the evidence presented, Kate and Maggie and Leah's behavior appears to be inexplicable unless they were not just acted upon by others but were also—at least intermittently—vigorous, calculating actors in the dissimulation that their mediumship entailed, proud of their skills, coolly reserved about their methods, and willing to proselytize for the spirits, even from the beginning of the rappings in 1848. Stuart mentions that Maggie and Katy's confessions to their mother that the rappings were fraudulent affected her mind and hastened her death. But even this does not lead Stuart, perhaps in reaction to earlier biographies, to place much, if any, blame on the girls for perpetrating a colossal imposture; she prefers to excuse them on account of their immaturity, frozen and extended into their adulthood. She does not much ponder what evil may have been wrought in others by "lying spirits" contacted by the Fox girls, even though the girls themselves, rising out of drug and alcohol stupors later in their lives, were bold enough to do so and to struggle fitfully to make amends. The reader is left with the impression that the Foxes' recent biographers may admire the girls more than the girls admired themselves.

To be culpable for evil or praiseworthy for virtue requires a self that is a real agent which can inherit the consequences of previous acts. But some of the most radical of the nineteenth-century spiritualists were also some of the earliest devotees of positivism. The positivist basis for contemporary academic writing encourages writers to treat perduring personalities as epiphenomenal illusions and to treat agents as mere momentary intersections of more fundamental forces and matter. So Stuart's conventionally configured biography is different from David Chapin's academic book, which is not precisely *about* the Foxes but rather about "the Antebellum culture of curiosity," with Maggie Fox and Elisha Kane figuring as illustrations and their lives figuring, formally speaking, only as anecdotal

data points. His subjects also include class and gender, with the Fox and Kane families figuring as illustrations of oppressed and oppressor.

Ordinarily, a popular biographer, whose subject is a person, can ignore such recondite matters of academic philosophy as what constitutes a real agent. But that question comes to the fore very insistently in a biography of a spiritualist medium. The spiritualist pioneers of the nineteenth century demonstrated the tenuousness of the self—its fragmentary nature, its multiplicity, its capacity for displacement or even disappearance. Who could blame the mediums for what they did or said when their bodies no longer held them but held instead someone or something else?

REFERENCES

- CHAPIN, D. (2004). *Exploring other worlds: Margaret Fox, Elisha Kent Kane, and the antebellum culture of curiosity*. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press.
- WEISBERG, B. (2004). *Talking to the dead: Kate and Maggie Fox and the rise of spiritualism*. San Francisco: HarperCollins.

JOHN BUESCHER

5017 Cockney Court
Annandale, VA 22003
jbbuescher@yahoo.com