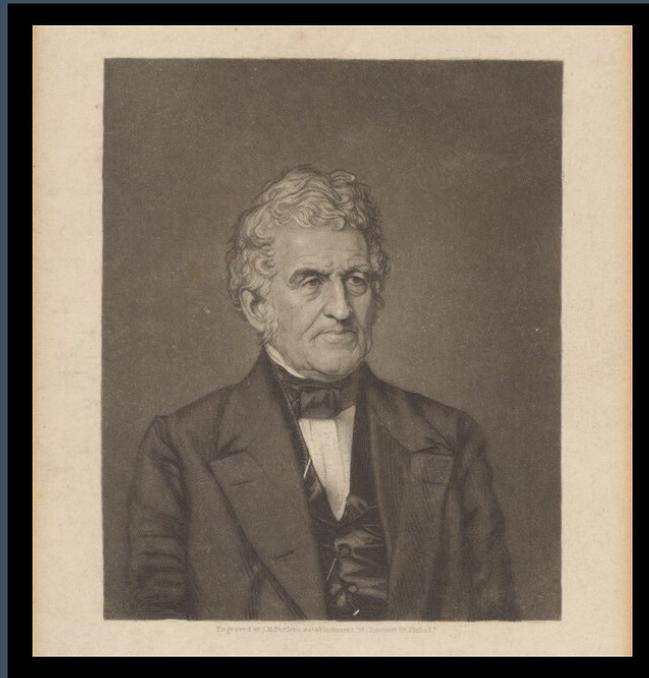


ROBERT HARE, M.D. THE AMERICAN SCIENTIST WHO PROVED SPIRITUALISM¹

by

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Most Spiritualists have heard of science pioneers like Sir William Crookes, F. W. H. Myers, Alfred Russel Wallace, and others. But few are familiar with an eminent American scientist who tested not only Maria B. Hayden, but other mediums, proving their legitimacy and advancing the Spiritualist movement.

Chair of Chemistry at the University of Pennsylvania Medical School, Robert Hare, M.D., born in 1781 in Pennsylvania, set out to disprove the rapping phenomena associated with mediums and Spiritualism.[2] He intended to apply the scientific method to testing mediums.

[1] This article is excerpted from Sharon DeBartolo Carmack, *In Search of Maria B. Hayden, M.D.: The First American Medium to Bring Spiritualism to the U.K.*, forthcoming Fall 2020.

[2] "Death of Dr. Robert Hare," *New York Times*, 17 May 1858, p. 4.

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After attending séances to see how mediums worked, he invented the Spiritoscope[3] to “detect fraud that he suspected lay behind these phenomena.”[4] But instead of finding deception, he became convinced of mediumship’s authenticity. Like Robert Owen in England, Hare championed Spiritualism, making front page news in the *New York Times* on 24 November 1855: “Hare on Spirits. A Savan Turned Spiritualist. Remarkable Developments.”[5] One of the mediums responsible for Hare’s conversion was Maria B. Hayden.

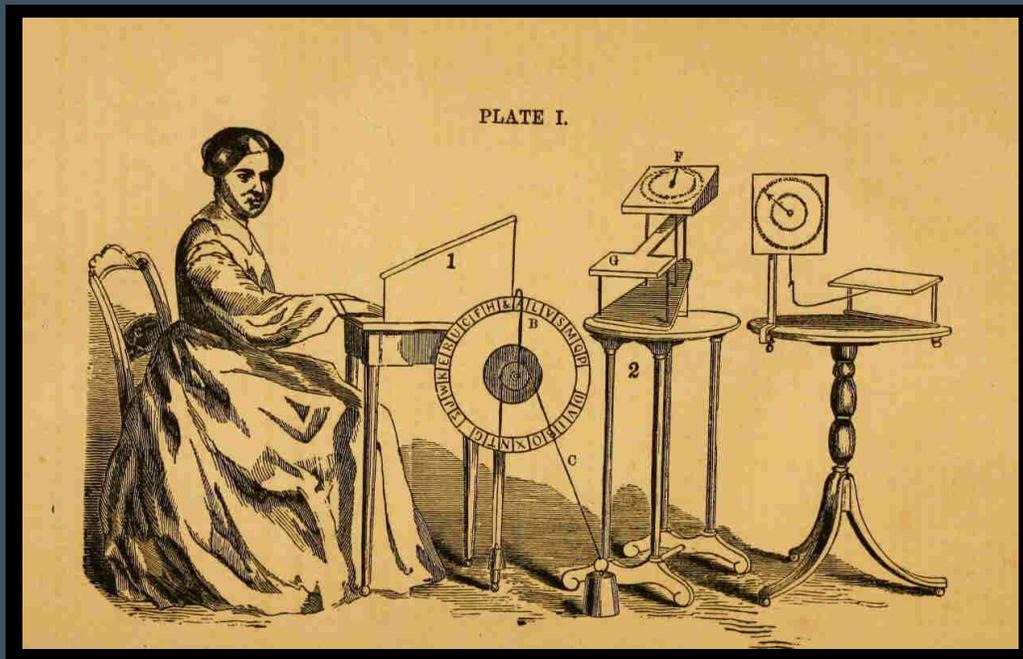


Figure xx: Medium using a “spiritoscope.”

“Engraving and description of the apparatus, which, being contrived for the purpose of determining whether the manifestations attributed to spirits could be made without mortal aid, by deciding the question affirmatively, led to the author’s conversion. Plate I. Fig. 1, is an engraving from a photograph of the apparatus above alluded to.” The whereabouts of the original photograph from which the lithograph was made and who the medium was who sat for the photograph are unknown. Robert Hare, *Experimental Investigation of the Spirit Manifestations* (New York: Partridge and Brittan, 1855), Plate I, Fig. 1.

[3] Detailed descriptions of his apparatus are in Robert Hare, *Experimental Investigation of the Spirit Manifestations: Demonstrating the Existence of Spirits and Their Communion with Mortals; Doctrine of the Spirit World Respecting Heaven, Hell, Morality, and God* (N.Y.: Partridge & Brittan, 1855.) Plates I–IV.

[4] Timothy W. Kneeland, “Robert Hare: Politics, Science, and Spiritualism in the Early Republic,” *Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* CXXXII (Jul. 2008): 245–260, quote at 256.

[5] “Hare on Spirits. A Savan Turned Spiritualist. Remarkable Developments. Celestial Machinery. Curious Contrivances to Catch Spirits Napping. Seven Spheres—A Supernal Sphere—And Thirty-Six Subdivisions. Where Bad Men Go. What Good Men Do. ‘Spirits of Just Men made Perfect.’ He Played upon a Harp of a Thousand Strings!” [then called] *The New-York Daily Times*, p. 1.

Hare had heard about Maria's reputation as an accomplished medium, so he visited her in Boston, his Spiritoscope in tow. He must have tested her by the end of September in 1855 because on the twenty-seventh of that month Maria used a quote from him in her advertisements: "Professor Hare's opinion of Mrs. Hayden as a Medium.—'I have great confidence in Mrs. Hayden as a sincere, conscientious Medium, and recommend her as being of the highest order.' Robert Hare." [6]

No doubt Maria, as well as other mediums, welcomed the new challenge. After all, this method of testing would finally lay to rest any accusations that the medium was a ventriloquist, cracked her toes, knocked her foot against a table leg, or had an accomplice who made the raps. This is why Hare's work was so valuable to the cause of Spiritualism. Using a screen, Hare cut off Maria's vision from the disc that contained letters of the alphabet. She rested her hands on the table, and the spirit vibrations operated through her hands to trigger the device, indicating the letters. "The Spirits could operate [the apparatus] so rapidly that it was difficult to take down the communications as fast as they were made. To prevent error, arising from the medium's own influence, tests were resorted to after the communications were given." [7] Hare asked the spirits to spell the name Washington and Jefferson. Both were spelled correctly. During one of his tests with Maria, he had her lift "her hands from the instrument, so that there was no contact with it, and yet the communication went on." [8]

Hare also sought Maria's help in locating a missing scroll containing communication from his deceased father through a writing medium. "On going next morning to Mrs. Hayden's, and my spirit father reporting himself, I inquired whether he knew what had become of the scroll. It was answered, that it had been left upon the seat in the car on my quitting it in Salem." Hare sent an inquiry to the train conductor, who confirmed it had been found on the seat, and it would be returned to Hare the next day. [9]

[6] *Boston Herald*, 27 Sept. 1855, p. 2, GenealogyBank.com. No date of his visit is given in his accounts, although in Hare, *Experimental Investigation*, 50, he said he visited Boston, "last autumn." The first publication that mentions Maria was in his lecture of November 1855.

[7] Robert Hare, "Spiritualism in the Tabernacle: A Descriptive and Philosophical Lecture," *Spiritual Telegraph*, 1 Dec. 1855, p. 1; also published as "Lecture on Spiritualism, delivered before an audience of three thousand at the Tabernacle, in the City of New York, in November 1855.... Revised by the author from the original report for the *Spiritual Telegraph*" (Philadelphia: Samuel Barry, [1855]), 11. Also see Hare, *Experimental Investigation of the Spirit Manifestations*, 50–55.

[8] Hare, "Spiritualism in the Tabernacle," *Spiritual Telegraph*, 1 Dec. 1855, p. 1.

[9] Hare, *Experimental Investigation*, 53.

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In another reading with Maria, a spirit gave Hare the initials “C. H.” Hare didn’t immediately recall a relative with those initials, but the communicator assured him he was related. Then Hare remembered a cousin Charles Hare and asked if the spirit was Charles’s son. The reply was yes. “The spirit then gave me the profession of his grandfather, also that of his father, and the fact of the former having been blown into the water at Toulon.... Only one mistake was made in referring to my English relatives, respecting an uncle’s name.”[10]

Though thoroughly convinced himself in the survival of the human soul, Hare, too, had his opponents. His obituary published in the *New York Times* on 17 May 1858 lauded his various academic accomplishments and scientific inventions, saying Hare had made “many of the most valuable discoveries of the century and how no man was held in higher esteem...giving evidence of his vigorous intellect and remarkable genius for invention.” Yet when it came to his conversion to Spiritualism and testing mediums, some labeled him delusional. The obituary claimed he had forced the subject upon the American Scientific Association, calling his invention of the Spiritoscope, “the last delusion into which a broken mind of the venerable gentleman was led.”[11]

A champion of Dr. Hare wrote a letter to the editor, identifying himself only as “Nassau,” which was published the following May 19th. Nassau came to the doctor’s defense, correcting many of the misstatements in the obituary. He claimed that the Association would not grant him a hearing. “They refused to investigate the subject.” Nassau also made reference to Hare’s 460+ page treatise on the subject, which detailed all of his experiments, unfortunately without the title: *Experimental Investigation of the Spirit Manifestations: Demonstrating the Existence of Spirits and Their Communion with Mortals; Doctrine of the Spirit World Respecting Heaven, Hell, Morality, and God*, published in 1855. Whether the letter changed anyone’s mind, we’ll never know.

Robert Hare’s testing of mediums, especially of Maria B. Hayden, was invaluable to the contribution to Spiritualism, and he has earned a place as one of Spiritualism’s pioneers. Finally, there was a way to test mediums that would rule out the accusations that the medium was a ventriloquist, cracked her toes, knocked her foot against a table leg, or had an accomplice who made the raps.

[10] Hare, *Experimental Investigation*, 53.

[11] “Death of Dr. Robert Hare,” *New York Times*, 17 May 1858, p. 4.

[12] “The Late Dr. Hare and Spiritualism,” *New York Times*, 27 May 1858, p. 2.