Fox Sisters

As children, Maggie and Kate Fox were at the centre of poltergeist-type phenomena in 1848 that led to the emergence of Spiritualism, a religion based on communication with spirits of the dead. Together with their older sister Leah they went on to perform as spirit mediums, becoming embroiled in life-long controversy. In 1888 Maggie, supported by Kate, declared before a public audience that they had faked the rapping sounds that purported to be communications by unseen spirits. A year later she retracted her statement. The confession remains controversial, disbelieved by many who consider psychic phenomena to be genuine, but accepted by sceptics, who frequently cite it in arguments against paranormal belief.

Background

Margaretta and Catherina, familiarly known as Maggie and Kate, were the youngest of six siblings born to Margaret Fox and her husband John David Fox, a blacksmith. The girls were born in Consecon, Prince Edward County, Ontario (then Upper Canada), after the couple reunited, having temporarily separated in 1820 following the birth of their fourth child. The split was probably caused by John's alcoholism; he later reformed and became a Methodist. In the 1840s the Fox family returned to Rochester, New York, and in December 1847 moved into a rented house in Hydesville, thirty miles from the city.

Leah was born in 1813, and was an adult living independently in Rochester at the time of the 1848 incidents.

Hydesville Disturbances

Towards the end of March 1848, percussive sounds that could not be accounted for were heard nightly in the Fox home. According to a signed statement made a few days later by the girls' mother, Margaret Fox, Maggie at this time was fourteen years of age ('in her fifteenth year') and Kate was 'about twelve years old', probably eleven (see 'Documentary Discrepancies' below). Margaret described the disturbances as follows:

> The first night that we heard the rapping, we all got up and lit a candle; and searched all over the house. The noise continued while we were hunting, and was heard near the same place all the time. It was not very loud, yet it produced a jar of the bedsteads and chairs, that could be felt by placing our hands on the chair, or while we were in bed. It was a feeling of a tremulous motion, more than a sudden jar'.[1]

The noises continued every night and defied all attempts to trace them, to the point where the family became exhausted from lack of sleep. One evening they went to bed early, and the disturbances began as usual. Kate, who slept in the same bed as Maggie, clicked her fingers in imitation. At this the sounds seemed to respond, answering with the same number as she had made with her fingers. Maggie then tried the same, saying 'do as I do', and the same number of raps as she had made

was again heard. Then Maggie asked for ten raps without making any raps herself, and ten raps sounded.

Margaret Fox described what happened next:

> I then asked if it was a human being that was making the noise, and if it was, to manifest it by the same noise. There was no noise. I then asked if it was a spirit, and if it was, to manifest it by two sounds. I heard two sounds as soon as the words were spoken. I then asked, if it was an injured spirit to give me the sound, and I heard the rapping distinctly. I then asked if it was injured in this house, and it manifested it by the noise. If the person was living that injured it, and got the same answer. I then ascertained, by the same method that its remains were buried under the dwelling, and how old it was.[2]

Visiting neighbours communicated with it in the same way; they also declared that the answers to their questions showed it had a much more detailed knowledge about them and their families than the Fox girls could have possessed. As described by Margaret Fox and the neighbours in their statements, the entity identified itself as a peddler who had been murdered for his money by a previous occupant named John Bell, and said his body had been buried beneath the floor.

The house was now overrun with visitors, who continued to hear the sounds during the evening. Eventually they tried to dig up the cellar, without result.

By now it had become clear that the noises – commonly referred to as 'raps' or 'knockings' – were associated with the two girls. According to a later written account by the girls' adult sister Leah,[3] who then lived in Rochester, other phenomena also manifested in their presence: tables moved, doors opened and shut, people present felt touches from cold hands, and there was a sound of dancing in clogs. These manifestations were widely attributed to invisible spirits, forming the conceptual foundation of what would quickly become the new religion Spiritualism.

The Fox girls began making appearances in Rochester, during which the putative spirits continued to make their presence felt. Meanwhile, a more determined search in the Hydseville house unearthed some strands of hair and bone fragments.

Interest in the Fox sisters continued to grow. Kate was invited to stay with Eliab W Capron, a young journalist, and his wife in Auburn, New York, where she submitted to tests. These were described by Capron in a book published the following year, which gives one of the most detailed descriptions of physical mediumship in its early years.[4] In sessions held in different rooms and in a variety of lighting conditions, tables tipped over, small chairs appeared glued to the floor, musical instruments played themselves, and invisible touches were felt.

Maggie stayed in Rochester with her adult sister Leah, who by now was said to be facilitating similar spirit communication. In July 1848, some of those present at a gathering devoted to women's rights and abolition of slavery, the Seneca Falls Convention, attended private demonstrations by the two women; they included early American feminists Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Amy Post.

During the course of 1849, the communicating spirits were said to be insistent that public demonstrations be held to spread the truth about survival of death. Accordingly, public meetings were held at Rochester's Corinthian Hall theatre, attended by several hundred people. Between the night of Wednesday 14 November and Saturday 17 November, three separate committees attempted to discover the true origin of the sounds, making the two women stand on pillows with the bottoms of their dresses tied to their ankles, and having them strip-searched. To the dismay of many present, the noises continued regardless, and none of the committees was able to identify fraudulent methods. Angered at this failure, detractors stormed the meeting and the sisters were obliged to leave under police protection.

Further performances were cancelled. However, the three sisters continued to give public sittings in Leah's house in Rochester. In 1850 visitors began making monetary gifts, beginning the three sisters' careers as professional mediums. In New York state they toured Albany, Troy, Buffalo, and eventually New York City. Leah, whose first husband had left her, remarried and moved to New York City. Maggie and Kate stayed with her when they were not touring, and their mother Margaret often visited. The new cult of Spiritualism began to spread: sitting circles formed all over the nation and numerous books, pamphlets and periodicals about séance activities were published.

In 1850, *New York Tribune* editor Horace Greeley invited Kate to live with his family and continue her education there, having been impressed that messages obtained through raps correctly answered questions about his four deceased children.

Mrs Norman Culver

In 1851, a relative by marriage of the sisters' elder brother David claimed in a deposition that Kate had made a detailed confession of fraud to her in the previous year. She related how Kate had described her methods: using the toes to create the rapping sounds and adopting magicians' tricks such as distraction, and reading facial clues and body language to give accurate answers to questions. Culver further alleged that Kate revealed how investigators at the Corinthian Hall had been fooled by a Dutch servant girl rapping with her knuckles under the floor from the cellar 'whenever she heard their voices calling the spirits'.[5]

Culver's claim was contested point by point by Eliab Capron, who insinuated that since it had been solicited by C Chauncey Burr – a Buffalo lawyer who independently made similar claims of fraud against the sisters (see below) – the details it contained were probably invented by him as part of his campaign to discredit them. Capron further pointed out that only Leah and Maggie took part in the Corinthian Hall investigations; Kate had been staying with him and his wife in Auburn at the time, and could not have known much about what transpired there.[6]

Elisha Kent Kane

In 1852, Maggie met the explorer Elisha Kent Kane, beginning an intermittent courtship. His family opposed the relationship, and he insisted she give up public mediumship, which like many people he viewed as disreputable. Kane died in

February 1857; Maggie claimed to have married him in a clandestine ceremony shortly before he departed for England on 11 October 1856, and referred to him as her husband, although this was not accepted by his family.7 She suffered a nervous breakdown, and began drinking heavily. To honour his wishes, she converted to Catholicism and rejected Spiritualism, though later a need for income obliged her to return to mediumship activities.

Charles Livermore

By 1861 Kate was reputed to convey messages from the dead by automatic writing and direct speech, as well as by coded rapping, producing messages from separate sources simultaneously. Witnesses claimed that spirit writing would sometimes materialize spontaneously in her presence (see below).

One of the most sensational claims about the Fox sisters concerns regular sessions that Kate held with Charles Livermore, a young New York financier mourning for his recently deceased wife Estelle.8 Some four hundred sittings were held between 1861 and 1866, in which full-form – and apparently solid – apparitions were said to manifest. Most sittings took place in Livermore's house and were subject to controls, the doors and windows being locked and the medium's hands held; many were witnessed by other observers. According to Livermore's testimony, a frequent visitor was Estelle herself. On one occasion, which he described in a letter to Benjamin Coleman, a British Spiritualist:

> I asked to be touched [and] when she advanced, [she] laid the arm across my forehead and permitted me to kiss it. I found it as large and as real in weight as a living arm … She held up the little finger and moved it characteristically and while we were looking at that – let her hair fall loosely down her back. The manifestation was concluded by her writing a card, resting it *upon my shoulder,* caressing me upon the head and temple and kissing me for good night.9

The apparition was unable to speak: communication was achieved through raps and writing. Another form that communicated by writing identified itself as the spirit of Benjamin Franklin.

Leah, meanwhile, married her third husband, Daniel Underhill. In 1865, John Fox died at age 76 of typhoid fever, followed shortly by Margaret of the same disease.

After the death of her parents in 1865, Kate began drinking excessively. Friends arranged for her to stay with the family of a doctor, George Taylor, who provided treatment in return for facilitating communications with his deceased children. She also provided sittings for the doctor's patients, one of whom, the anti-slavery activist Harriet Beecher Stowe, later described to the novelist George Eliot how she had witnessed phosphorescent lights floating among the sitters: 'They were like the dear light of a glow worm. They touched me on my arm and I felt that they had a strong resistant force – one of them struck the table with a loud report like the firing of a pistol…' Stowe also described how her husband 'was moved back from the table four feet to the wall, chair and all, and then placed again at the table'. 10

In 1871, Kate Fox travelled to England where she met and married Henry Dietrich Jencken; the couple had two sons. She worked as a medium and took part in experiments with William Crookes (see below). When Jencken died in 1881, Kate returned with her sons to America, staying first with Leah, then with her brother David.

Confession

In 1885, Leah published *The Missing Link in Modern Spiritualism*, a history of the Fox family and Spiritualism. A recent biographer, Barbara Weisberg, describes the book as 'a mixed bundle of distortions and truths' that places emphasis on events in which Leah herself was prominent.[11] This caused tensions with Maggie and Kate, who felt that their elder sister, having capitalized on their abilities and largely escaped the criticisms that had been directed at them, was again exploiting their fame.

In the same year, Kate moved to New York City with her sons, where she conducted private sittings and hosted a weekly public gathering. She was arrested when found to be drunk at home and charged with neglect of her children, now aged fourteen and twelve; the boys were sent to the Juvenile Asylum. Word of this reached Maggie, who was visiting friends in England; she sent a cable purporting to be from a brother of the boys' deceased father, claiming to be the boys' legal guardian, in which she ordered them to be released to Kate. This was done, and Kate then fled with them to England.

Maggie and Kate both suspected Leah of having arranged the arrest out of spite and to exert control over Kate and her children. At this time, the two women faced growing criticism from within the Spiritualist movement they had helped to bring into being. Conservative, middle-class members Spiritualists were embarrassed by their drinking, and uneasy with the movement's reputation for radicalism and rampant fraud. According to Weisberg, this is the background to the sisters' show of hostility at this time towards the activity that had made them famous: 'Trying to position herself in the most respectable light, Kate criticized the "fanatics who hire halls and preach universal belief in everything." She was a firm believer in some manifestations, she asserted, but not in all.'[12] For her part, Maggie sent a statement to the *New York Herald* that was printed under the headline 'The Curse of Spiritualism', in which she denounced fake mediums and the 'fanatics' who blindly believed anything, to the detriment of their sanity and their wallets.[13]

Both women, Weisberg suggests, blamed their misfortunes 'as much on members of the Spiritualist movement as on outsiders'.

Between some Spiritualists' obsession with ever more explosive effects, the willingness of unscrupulous mediums to produce the desired pyrotechnics, and other Spiritualists' dread of scandal, there was little call, it seemed, for rapping spirits. The pressure to work effectively in such an atmosphere, Maggie intimated, could drive even an honest, sober medium to drink or to deception.[14]

Following an attack on Kate in the leading British Spiritualist publication *Light*, Maggie gave an interview to a reporter for the *New York Herald,* in which she

blamed Leah and her mother Margaret Fox as follows:

> When Spiritualism first began, Katie and I were little children, and this old woman, my other sister, made us her tools. Mother was a silly woman. She was a fanatic. I call her that because she was honest. She believed in these things. We were but innocent little children. What did we know? Ah we grew to know too much. Our sister used us in her exhibitions, and we made money for her. Now she turns upon us because she's the wife of a rich man, and she opposes us both wherever she can. Oh, I am after her! You can kill sometimes without using weapons, you know.

She added that she knew communication with spirits is impossible, since she had tried repeatedly but in vain to communicate with 'her husband' Elisha Kane. She went on to demonstrate the raps to the reporter, which he heard underneath the table, on the outside of the door, and rippling across the floor, but claimed they were the result of trickery, which she would she would soon reveal.

On the evening of 21 October 1888, Maggie appeared at a much publicized event at the New York Academy of Music, where she read a statement that had been published that morning in the *New York World*. Kate was in the audience. She declared that at the time of the 1848 Hydesville disturbances she and Kate were innocent children aged eight and five.

> We were very mischievous children and sought merely to terrify our dear mother, who was a very good woman and very easily frightened. When we went to bed at night we used to tie an apple a string and move the string up and down, causing the apple to bump on the floor, or we would drop the apple the floor, making a strange noise every time it would rebound. Mother listened to this for a time. She would not understand it and did not suspect us as being capable of a trick because we were so young. At last she could stand it no longer and she called the neighbors in and told them about it. It was this that set us to discover a means of making the raps more effectually. I think, when I reflect about it, that it was a most wonderful discovery, a very wonderful thing that children should make such a discovery, and all through a desire to do mischief only.
>
> There were so many people coming to the house that we were not able to make use of the apple trick except when we were in bed and the room was dark. Even then we could hardly do it, so the only way was to rap on the bedstead. And that is the way we began. First, as a mere trick to frighten mother, and then, when so many people came to see us children, we were ourselves frightened, and for self-preservation forced to keep it up. No one suspected us of any trick because we were such young children. We were led on by my sister purposely and by mother unintentionally. We often heard her say: 'Is this a disembodied spirit that has taken possession of my dear children?' That encouraged our fun and we went on.

Maggie continued that the two girls discovered a new way to make the raps after Leah had taken them to stay with her in Rochester.

> My sister Katie was the first to observe that by swishing her fingers she could produce certain noises with her knuckles and joints, and that the same effect could be made with the toes. Finding that we could make raps with our feet – first with one foot and then with both – we practised until we could do this easily when the room was dark. Like most perplexing things when made clear, it is astonishing how easily it is done. The rappings are simply the result of a perfect control of the muscles of the leg below the knee, which govern the tendons of the foot and allow action of the toe and ankle bones that is not commonly known. Such perfect control is only possible when a child is taken at an early age and carefully and continually taught to practice the muscles which grow stiff in later years. A child at twelve is almost too old. With control of the muscles of the foot, the toes may be brought down to the floor without any movement that is perceptible to the eye. The whole foot, in fact, can be made to give rappings by the use only of the muscles below the knee. This, then, is the simple explanation of the whole method of the knocks and raps.

According to Maggie, the girls took part in exhibitions put on by Leah, in which they responded to covert signs made by her to know when to rap yes or no in response to questions. Leah made up to 0 a night, which she kept for herself. They then toured the US, 'led around like lambs', drawing immense crowds.

With regard to the possibility of spirits surviving death, Maggie said:

> As far as Spirits were concerned neither my sister nor I thought about it. I know that there is no such thing as the departed returning to this life. Many people have said to me that such a thing was possible and seemed to believe so firmly in it that I tried to see, and I have tried in every form and know that it cannot be done. After I married, Dr. Kane would not let me refer to my old life – he wanted me to forget it. But when I was poor, after his death, I was driven to it again, and I wish to say clearly that I owe all my misfortune to that woman, my sister.

She concluded with a powerful attack on Spiritualism, which she aimed to expose 'from its very foundation'.

> I loathe the thing I have been. I used to say to those who wanted me to give a séance: 'You are driving me into Hell!' Then the next day I would drown my remorse in wine. I was too honest to remain a 'medium'. That's why I gave up my exhibitions. I have seen so much miserable deception! Every morning of my life I have it before me. When I wake up I brood over it. That is why I am willing to state that Spiritualism is a fraud of the worst description. I have had a life of sorrow, I have been poor and ill, but I consider it my duty, a sacred thing, a holy mission to expose it. I want to see the day when it is entirely done away with. After my sister Katie and I expose it I hope Spiritualism will be given a death blow.

Maggie's statements shocked the Spiritualist community and provided permanent fodder for detractors. Newspapers called the confession a 'death-blow' to Spiritualism. A popular book added salacious details, suggesting that sittings had

become bacchanals in which scantily-clad females impersonated ghosts, and sexual orgies took place.[15]

Kate occasionally toured to repeat the accusations against Spiritualism.

However, in 1889 she told a friend she believed there was now more money to be made proving the raps were *not* made with the toes.[16] Maggie too reversed her position, and in November 1889 recanted her confession, which in an interview with witnesses present she now claimed she'd made under pressure from opponents of Spiritualism, including powerful Catholics. She is reported to have said: 'I gave expression to utterances that had no foundation in fact and that would at the time throw discredit on the Spiritual phenomena'.[17] Leah largely escaped censure.

Leah died of carditis on 1 November 1890, likely aged 77 or 78. Kate died while drinking on 2 July 1892, likely aged 55. Maggie died in poverty on 8 March 1893 of heart trouble, aged 59.

Investigations

The Fox sisters submitted to many controls and investigations, from having their feet held during sittings to being strip-searched for equipment suitable for trickery.

Eliab Capron

In an early test, Eliab Capron covered a quantity of small shells with his hand and asked for raps to indicate their number. He stated that the responses were accurate, even when he himself did not know how many there were until he counted them afterwards.

Corinthian Hall, Rochester

According to Capron's account, the five members of the initial investigating committee at the Corinthian Hall agreed that they heard the sounds, and that they were entirely unable to discover how they were made. A second committee was similarly unable to reach a conclusion. The third committee subjected the girls to a strip search and made them stand on glass, a non-conducting surface, to test whether the sounds were being produced electrically; it too reported that the sounds had been heard and that no mechanism of fraud had been discovered.[18]

Buffalo

C Chauncey Burr, a lawyer who was determined to debunk Spiritualism, suggested that the Fox sisters, including Leah, were creating the sounds by cracking their toes. He and his brother claimed to have demonstrated that the resulting sounds could be heard in a hall filled with an audience of a thousand people. In 1851, three medical professors at the University of Buffalo examined the three sisters in a series of investigations: they reported that no sounds were heard when their knees were held or if cushions were placed under their feet, leading them to conclude that the women were causing them by physical means.

Boston Courier

In June 1857, Leah and Kate accepted a challenge by the *Boston Courier* to pay 0 to anyone who could demonstrate spirit communication to the satisfaction of four distinguished Harvard professors, including Benjamin Pierce and Louis Agassiz. Ten mediums made attempts over two days. The newspaper reported that only the Fox sisters had produced any phenomena, but dismissed them as 'a little rapping ... easily traceable to their persons and easily done by others without the pretense of spirits'.19

Eleanor Sidgwick

Psychical researcher Eleanor Sidgwick attended a sitting in 1874 with Kate Fox while investigating mediums together with her husband Henry Sidgwick. She reported that a blank sheet of paper supplied by herself (Sidgwick) and placed under the séance table was found to have a word written on it, while Kate remained motionless in visible light. However, Sidgwick later speculated that Kate had produced the writing with her foot, a common fake medium's trick. In a test carried out a decade later under the auspices of the newly-formed Society for Psychical Research (of which her husband Henry Sidgwick was co-founder and president), Sidgwick heard rapping noises that she conceded sounded unlike anything that could be produced by the foot. Nevertheless, after reading the thirty-year-old report of the Buffalo medical professors she decided this must be how the sounds were made.20

Seybert Commission

In 1884, Maggie was one of several mediums investigated by the Seybert Commission, a group formed to investigate Spiritualist claims and funded by Henry Seybert, a wealthy American philanthropist. Transcripts show the raps were erratic, as were the answers to questions, during two sittings. At one point it was discovered that while there was no motion in Maggie's foot when raps were occurring, there was an 'unusual pulsation', leading to the view that she was somehow causing the sounds, whether deliberately or unwittingly.

In another incident:

> The Medium, ostensibly under Spirit influence, with lead pencil in hand proceeded to write two communications from the Spirit of the late Henry Seybert. The first of these covered two pages of paper of the size of ordinary foolscap. The Medium wrote in large characters, with remarkable rapidity, and in a direction from the right to the left, or the reverse of ordinary handwriting. The writing, consequently, could be read only from the reverse side of the paper and by being held up so as to permit the gas-light to pass through it.
>
> The communications, as deciphered by Mr. Sellers, with the aid of Mr. Fullerton and the Medium, were as follows: 'You must not expect that I can satisfy you beyond all doubt in so short a time as you have yet had. I want to give you all in my power, and will do so if you will give me a chance. You must

> commence right in the first place or you shall all be disappointed for a much longer time. *Principipis Obsta Sero Medicina Paratum.* Henry Seybert.'[21]

William Crookes

The most thorough investigation was that undertaken by the British scientist William Crookes with respect to Kate Fox and reported in an 1874 paper. The tests were carried out with Kate and also with the medium Daniel Douglas Home in his own house, subject to his controls and at times of his choosing, and observed by trusted family members and associates. Crookes divides the phenomena into different types.

Sounds

Crookes finds Kate to be more productive of sounds than any medium he has ever encountered. He writes:

> With mediums, generally it is necessary to sit for a formal *séance* before anything is heard; but in the case of Miss Fox it seems only necessary for her to place her hand on any substance for loud thuds to be heard in it, like a triple pulsation, sometimes loud enough to be heard several rooms off. In this manner I have heard them in a living tree – on a sheet of glass – on a stretched iron wire – on a stretched membrane – a tambourine – on the roof of a cab – and on the floor of a theatre. Moreover, actual contact is not always necessary; I have had these sounds proceeding from the floor, walls, etc., when the medium's hands and feet were held – when she was standing on a chair – when she was suspended in a swing from the ceiling – when she was enclosed in a wire cage – and when she had fallen fainting on a sofa. I have heard them on a glass harmonicon – I have felt them on my own shoulder and under my own hands. I have heard them on a sheet of paper, held between the fingers by a piece of thread passed through one corner … by a pre-arranged code of signals, questions are answered, and messages given with more or less accuracy.[22]

Direct Writing

Crookes uses this term for writing not produced by any person present. He recounts one example involving Kate:

> I was sitting next to the medium, Miss Fox, the only other persons present being my wife and a lady relative, and I was holding the medium's two hands in one of mine, whilst her feet were resting on my feet. Paper was on the table before us, and my disengaged hand was holding a pencil.
>
> A luminous hand came down from the upper part of the room, and after hovering near me for a few seconds, took the pencil from my hand, rapidly wrote on a sheet of paper, threw the pencil down, and then rose up over our heads, gradually fading into darkness.[23]

Simultaneous Communication

Crookes describes Kate's ability to facilitate communications simultaneously:

> I have been with Miss Fox when she has been writing a message automatically to one person present, whilst a message to another person on another subject was being given alphabetically by means of 'raps', and the whole time she was conversing freely with a third person on a subject totally different from either.[24]

Miscellaneous Phenomena

A sitting was held in darkness in Crookes's dining room. Crookes held both of Kate's hands in his. The tinkling of a bell was heard, 'not stationary, but moving about in all parts of the room: at one time by the wall, at another in a further corner of the room, now touching me on the head, and now tapping against the floor. After ringing about the room in this manner for fully five minutes, it fell upon the table close to my hands'.[25]

When the room was illuminated, Crookes discovered the ringing bell was his own hand-bell, which he had left locked in his library, the key in his pocket. No one had moved, and Kate's hands had stayed still. The door could not have been opened, or light from outside would have been seen. His two sons, aged fourteen and twelve, had been in the library at the time, and thought the bell was in its usual place until Crookes pointed out that it was not. They assured him that no one had entered the room.

Documentary Discrepancies

Ages

A significant discrepancy relates to the ages of Maggie and Kate Fox at the time of the Hydesville disturbances. Their mother Margaret Fox, early in the detailed statement she signed on 11 April 1848 (while the noises were still being heard), describes Kate as 'about twelve years old' and Maggie as being 'in her fifteenth year'.

By contrast, in her 1888 confession statement Maggie describes herself and her sister as 'very young children' at the time, and adds: 'I was only eight, just a year and a half older than she.' Two years earlier, writing specifically to correct the ages given in a press article, she claims that in 1848 'we were little children, and have no recollection of the events said to have occurred at that early period.'[26]

In the intervening period conflicting ages were given by other writers, as chronicled by historian Lisa Warwood. Robert Dale Owen, meeting in 1860 with Maggie and Kate, their older brother David and mother Margaret, says he was informed that in 1848 Maggie had been 'twelve years old; and Kate, nine.'[27]

Emma Hardinge gives the older ages in her 1870 book *Modern American Spiritualism*, apparently on the authority of Margaret Fox's 1848 statement. However, a later chapter that was written after the first part had been typeset, offers a correction that Hardinge said she had been requested to make, according to which

Margaret Fox had made a public statement in 1968 revising the girls' ages at the time of the Hydesville disturbances as ten and seven. Warwood points out that this is questionable, as Mrs Fox had died two years earlier in 1865.28

Census data for the Fox sisters similarly diverges, depending on whether the information was provided by the sisters or their parents. In the 1840 census, the Fox household is recorded as having two female children aged 'under five'. This is likely to refer to Maggie and Kate, since at this time the older Fox children were no longer living at home.

In the 1850 census, Margaretta (Maggie) is said to be sixteen and Catherine (Kate) fourteen,29 concordant with their mother's 1848 statement.

The 1860 census records, presumably based on information provided by the adult sisters, gives Maggie's birth date as 1837 and Kate's as 1839, in which case they would have been eleven and nine in 1848. No information has been found in later census records in the US for either of the sisters. However, Kate is recorded in the 1872 English census, when she was living in London with her husband and two children: her age is given as 37, in which case she would have been four or five in March 1848.30

The tombstone on the sisters' grave records a birth date of 7 October 1833 for Margaretta and 27 March 1837 for Catherine. The dates were provided by a close friend of Maggie named Titus Merritt, who claimed she had given him these dates herself. Merritt recorded that Maggie was 59 years and five months old when she died and that Kate was 55 years three months and five days old at her death some nine months earlier. This corresponds broadly with the older ages given for 1848: Maggie would have been fourteen years and five months old, and Kate would have just turned eleven.

Evidence in support of the older ages is found in correspondence by Isaac and Amy Post, a Quaker abolitionist couple living in Rochester, who briefly provided accommodation to the Fox family in the immediate aftermath of the Hydesville disturbances. Here they describe Maggie and Kate as '[g]irls of twelve and fourteen years who used to live in our house at Cornhill and with whom we always had good understanding.'31 It should also be noted that if the age given in Maggie's 1888 confession statement is correct, when she began her courtship with Kane in 1852 she would have been just twelve.

Hydesville Peddler

Other details commonly found in narratives about the Fox sisters are discrepant and some may have been invented. In contrast to later accounts, the earliest records suggest that the two girls had very little to do with the attempts to identify the peddler.32 Historian Paul J Gaunt established that the original pamphlet by EE Lewis differs in some respects from the version that was reprinted by Eliab Capron, and which is the one commonly quoted, particularly in this regard. Stories according to which Maggie said, 'Here Mr Splitfoot, do as I do,' and the story of the peddler revealing his identity appear to have been embellishments added in later publications, notably Leah's 1885 book *The Missing Link* and in Robert Dale Owen's

Footfalls on the Boundary of Another World (1860). There are different versions of the name supposed to have been given by the peddler, variously Rosa, Rosma and Rosna. Bones unearthed in 1904 that were claimed by Spiritualists and some newspapers as the remains of the putative peddler have never been verified, nor has any record of a peddler of that name (or variants) been discovered.33

Criticisms

Sceptical authors view the Fox sisters as the original fraudulent mediums, considering their putative ability to make percussive noises by manipulating their limbs sufficient explanation for the acclaim and controversies that followed them. They give special prominence to the Culver deposition, the 1851 Buffalo doctors' investigation, and Maggie Fox's confessional statement in 1888. They correctly point out that these evidences were generally disbelieved by Spiritualists at the time and lament that present-day accounts of the Fox sisters fail to do them justice or ignore them altogether. The absence of any proof with regard to the claims concerning the peddler are likewise held to weaken the case.34

Defenders point out that none of the three sisters were ever caught red-handed in trickery, and that no direct link was ever established between, on the one hand, the percussive sounds that hundreds of observers found to be inexplicable and, on the other, movements the women might or might not be making with their legs, feet and ankles. They disbelieve the Culver statement, which had been solicited by a campaigning sceptic, was uncorroborated by other investigations, and showed knowledge and sophistication unusual for an adolescent girl of the period. With regard to the confession by Maggie Fox, they point out that her heavy reliance on her claim of the sisters being young and innocent – they were mischievous children, their parents never suspected them of playing tricks, they had the necessary dexterity in their toes to produce loud noises which an older person lacks – is significant only if it is accepted that she was misrepresenting their true (older) ages.35

It has also been noted that although the Hydesville episode, as the foundational event that launched Spiritualism, is treated as a unique historical event, it is closely similar in its essentials to hundreds of similar documented incidents of the 'poltergeist' type, characterized in particular by unexplained 'raps' and 'knockings' which in a few notable cases were also found to be responsive, as if caused by some intelligence.36 In the Hydesville case, the claim that these noises were caused by children's tricks contrasts with contemporary witness statements, for instance that made by a neighbour, William Duesler, who said:

> I can in no way account for this singular noise, which others and I have heard. It is a mystery to me, which I am wholly unable to solve. I am willing to testify under oath that I did not make the noises or rapping which I and others heard: that I do not know of any person who did or could have made them; that I have spent considerable time since then, in order to satisfy myself as to the cause of it; but cannot account for it on any other ground than it is supernatural.37

KM Wehrstein and Robert McLuhan

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Endnotes

Footnotes

- 1. Lewis (1848).
- 2. Lewis (1848).
- 3. Underhill (1885).
- 4. Capron & Barron (1850).
- 5. Cited in Weisberg (2004), 128-9.
- 6. Weisberg (2004), 129.
- 7. Kane, 1866.
- 8. Described in Owen (1872) and in Sargent (1869); the latter includes excerpts from Livermore's letters and diary.
- 9. Quoted in Weisberg (2004), 202.
- 10. Quoted in Weisberg (2004), 216.
- 11. Weisberg (2004), 235.
- 12. Weisberg (2004), 237.
- 13. Davenport (1888/1976), 30-31.
- 14. Weisberg (2004), 238.
- 15. Davenport (1888/1976).
- 16. Weisberg (2004), 255.
- 17. Weisberg (2004), 255.
- 18. Capron & Willets (1849), cited in Gaunt (2012), 5-9.
- 19. Cited in Weisberg (2004), 191.

- 20. Sidgwick (1886), 46-7.
- 21. Seybert Commission (1887, 1920).
- 22. Crookes (1874), 83.
- 23. Crookes (1874), 87.
- 24. Crookes (1874), 90.
- 25. Crookes (1874), 91.
- 26. *New York Times* (29 April 1886).***
- 27. Owen (1860), 285.
- 28. Hardinge (1870), 29.
- 29. Cited in Warwood (2008), 189-90.
- 30. Warwood (2008), 194.
- 31. Braude (2001), 10-11.
- 32. Gaunt (2012).
- 33. Nickell (2008).
- 34. E.g.: Kurtz (1991).
- 35. McLuhan (2010), 49-52.
- 36. E.g., Colvin (2008); others are listed here.
- 37. Lewis (1848), 12.