



## Spiritualism in Australia and the Great War

by Peter Stanley

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I was interested to read Suzanne Grogan's post about the largely unacknowledged, and certainly incompletely explored question of spiritualism in the Great War. As in so many aspects of the war, Robert Graves's *Goodbye to All That* alerted me forty-odd years ago to bereaved parents' recourse to spiritualism. After he had been wounded on the Somme in 1916 he stayed with a family in Kent, a son of which had been killed on Gallipoli. Graves left early, disturbed by rapping noises and shrieks in the night, and encountering the mother fully dressed in the small hours, presumably communing with her son in his room which she had preserved exactly as he had left it. 'There were thousands of mothers like her?', he recalled, 'getting in touch with their dead sons by various spiritualistic means'.<sup>[1]</sup>

In Australia a great deal of attention has been paid by historians to the effects of the war on the bereaved 'works of compassion and insight, such as Joy Damousi's *The Labour of Loss*, Stephen Garton's *The Cost of War*, or Bart Ziino's *A Distant Grief*.<sup>[2]</sup> Despite the popular engagement with the history of the Great War in Australia (and with its mythology and emotion), little interest seems to have been taken in the response of spiritualism.

Australian historians, even the best of those exploring the impact of mass death, have directed little attention to spiritualism. Joy Damousi tells an affecting story of a mother communing with her dead son 'but in 1944. Stephen Garton describes a sance held in Melbourne in 1920. Bart Ziino wrote insightfully of the importance of 'phantoms' in coming to terms with the cost of war 'but largely in terms of Will Longstaff's painting *The Menin Gate at Midnight* (enormously popular in cheap reproductions) rather than individually, through, say, sances.

Writing the 'social history' chapters of a volume dealing with the Australian experience of the Great War at home, I was struck anew by the surprising dearth of reference to spiritual responses to bereavement, and included in my section on 'death and grief' a paragraph discussing spiritualism in Australia:

*Throughout the war the two dozen lodges of the Theosophical Society, the formal wing of the spiritualist movement, grew, with an eight-storey headquarters in Sydney and substantial buildings in most states. Mainly middle-class, its members included bereaved parents anxious to contact dead soldier sons, or at least to be comforted that they lived on in other realms. Theosophists had reacted optimistically to its outbreak, believing that mass death in a 'noble cause created a bank of souls ready to reincarnate for higher evolutionary purposes'.<sup>[3]</sup> Bereaved more interested in solace than higher evolutionary purposes turned to clairvoyance, which underwent a minor resurgence as women especially sought comfort. With so many men in peril, from the moment their transports left harbour, not surprisingly many civilians resorted to superstition. Fortune-tellers and clairvoyants became popular, often prosecuted by state police forces that regarded them as cheats rather than as bearers of consolation, a phenomenon awaiting investigation. Fortune-telling was illegal in some states 'in Victoria attracting relatively light fines; presumably no deterrent to amateurs filling a need for reassurance. Norman Lindsay recalled the 'universal sense of shocked insecurity' which sent nearly everybody into the back-parlour limbo of Spiritualism'.<sup>[1]</sup> Hardly 'nearly everybody?', but certainly Lindsay. Though her husband had decried C.J. Dennis's verse as 'maudlin rubbish [as] a consolation for their dead?', Rose Lindsay described*

*Norman's distress when he learned of the death of his brother Reg, killed during the Somme winter. Norman acquired a Ouija board and with it tried to communicate with Reg (and, being Norman, also with Shakespeare and the god Apollo).*

(To explain 'local' references in a paragraph in a volume pressed for words: C.J. Dennis was the popular poet whose books, especially *Songs of a Sentimental Bloke* and *The Moods of Ginger Mick*, became massive publishing successes (and is discussed elsewhere in the volume). Norman Lindsay was a Sydney cartoonist and artist whose self-conscious libertarian bohemianism co-existed with his creation of some of the most vicious anti-German propaganda of Australia's war. Gunner Reg Lindsay was killed on the Somme on 31 December 1917.)

Why is it that historians have generally neglected the spiritualist response to bereavement in the Great War? How common was it? Did the bereaved find fortune-tellers, clairvoyants or mediums already practising, or did they emerge to meet the demand, as it were? Who sought out spiritualist routes to contact the dead? Working class or middle class; men or women? How did laws governing fortune-telling affect the way it was used, or the way it was reported? We hardly have answers to these questions.

But we might; thanks to the availability of digitised Australian newspapers of the Great War period through the National Library of Australia's astonishing Trove data base (<http://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper?q=%20>). It enables us to trace references to 'clairvoyants?', 'fortune-tellers?', 'spiritualists?', 'sances' and (with more difficulty) 'mediums' for hundreds of metropolitan and local newspapers throughout the period and to compare reports and references before, during and after the war. This new tool should by itself re-invigorate the investigation of this response to the Great War.

I'm hoping that someone in Australia might take up this question. It's worthy of everything from an honours thesis (looking at spiritualism in one state, perhaps) to an MA or even a PhD. I think (if the evidence sustains it) there could be a book in this.

[1] Norman Lindsay, *My Mask: For what little I know of the man behind it*, Angus & Robertson, Sydney, 1973, p. 196

[1] Robert Graves, *Goodbye to All That*, Penguin Books, Harmondsworth, 1960, p. 192

[2] Joy Damousi, *The Labour of Loss: Mourning, Memory and Wartime Bereavement in Australia*, CUP, Melbourne, 1999; Stephen Garton, *The Cost of War: Australians Return*, OUP, Melbourne, 1996; Tanja Luckins, *The Gates of Memory: Australian People's Experiences and Memories of Loss and the Great War*, Curtin University Press, Perth, 2004; Bart Ziino, *A Distant Grief: Australians, War Graves and the Great War*, UWA Press, Perth, 2007

[3] Jill Roe, *Beyond Belief: Theosophy in Australia 1879-1939*, UNSW Press, Sydney, 1986, p. 225

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