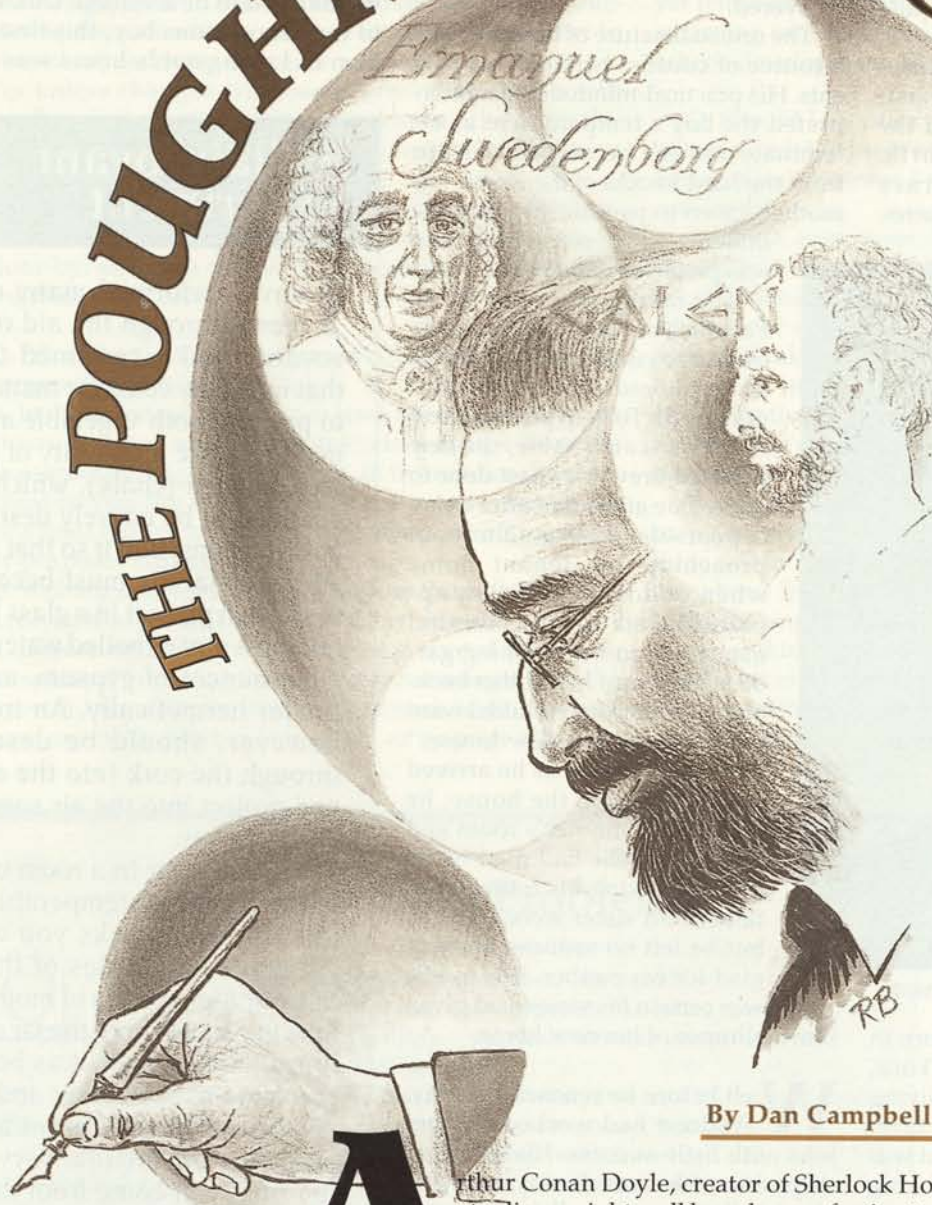


THE POUGHKEEPSIE SEER

ROBERT BOURDEAUX



"His psychic development went on, and before he reached his twenty-first year he had attained a state when he needed no second person to throw him into trance but could do it for himself. He was very humble-minded, and yet he was of the stuff that saints are made of."

— Arthur Conan Doyle
in *The History of Spiritualism*

By Dan Campbell

Arthur Conan Doyle, creator of Sherlock Holmes and a student of spiritualism, might well have been referring to Edgar Cayce in his description of a renowned clairvoyant. In fact, he was describing Andrew Jackson Davis, the "Poughkeepsie Seer and Clairvoyant," as Davis was dubbed on posters announcing his public appearances over a century ago.

A man of immense psychic ability, Davis was as well known in the nineteenth century as Cayce has become in this one. His clairvoyant harvest certainly was as remarkable, and although less is known about the details of his life than that of Cayce's, there are striking parallels between the two seers:

- Both were poor students in elementary school.
- Both, as adolescents, had mystical experiences that changed their lives.
- Both discovered their psychic abilities as a result of being hypnotized, and later found the trance state could be self-induced.
- Each was fortunate in having a mother with psychic leanings who was thus able to understand when her son began to have paranormal experiences.



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- Both quit school at an early age to work and help support their poor families.

- They devoted their lives to helping people, diagnosing their ailments and prescribing treatments, some quite unorthodox.

- Both gave psychic commentaries on the nature and meaning of existence, but only Cayce employed the concept of reincarnation on Earth. Davis described the soul's journey through a succession of spiritual spheres.

it was all right for him to "drink the sweet water of maple trees." She saw to it that maples were tapped in a nearby wooded area. He drank the sap and recovered.

The unusual nature of their son was a source of conflict between his parents. His practical-minded father interpreted the boy's temperament as effeminate and felt he needed to learn from the hard knocks of the world. His mother, given to psychic impressions, understood his sensibilities and was protective of her son.

The family moved to Hyde Park, where their hardscrabble existence continued, his father unemployed and his mother gravely ill. To help provide food for their scanty table, the boy peddled brewer's yeast door to door. One afternoon after a day of poor sales, he was glumly approaching his tenant home when suddenly a vision appeared before him of a beautiful mansion amid flourishing gardens. He heard his mother beckoning, "Come here, child; I want to show you my new house." The vision ended as he arrived home. Entering the house, he went to his mother's room and discovered she had died while he was making his rounds. His father and sister were in tears, but he felt no sadness. He was glad for his mother, because he was certain his vision had given him a glimpse of her new home.



Andrew Jackson Davis in his early 30s, circa 1857.

Andrew Jackson Davis was born in 1826 in Blooming Grove, New York, where his father made a meager living as a shoemaker, weaver, and farm hand. The family's financial plight was compounded by the father's drinking problem, which he did not overcome until his son was 11 years old. Writing about Davis's early years, one author noted, "At school during a bare five months' attendance, he had shown no aptitude for learning and was naturally dull and backward, while his timidity and awkwardness made him the victim of the contempt and persecution of his fellow pupils."

Throughout his youth, Davis received visions and psychic impressions – as if he were being directed toward his ultimate career. During an illness with a fever, after the doctor advised against giving the child cold water, he told his mother he heard a voice saying

Well before he reached puberty, Andrew had worked at other jobs with little success. His sensitive disposition – he was already receiving psychic flashes – as well as his youth did not help his efforts at mundane labor. At age 12 he worked as a farmhand and shepherd. "It was during this outdoor work," one writer recounted, "that he several times heard strange music and voices, and an intimation was given him that he should go to Poughkeepsie." Eventually he persuaded his father to relocate to this village just down the Hudson River where his destiny lay.

It may be that those drawn to psychic work are rarely the conscious arbiters of their calling; the choice seems to be made on a deeper level. Neither Cayce nor Davis asked for psychic powers.

Andrew's first intimations of his gift

occurred when he underwent hypnosis at age 17 under the guidance of William Levingston, a village tailor, after a touring mesmerist failed when the boy volunteered to be a subject. Unknown to the unconscious boy, this first session in Levingston's home was wit-

A Clairvoyant Experiment

I have performed many experiments through the aid of clairvoyance and ascertained the fact that man may combine matter so as to produce both vegetable and animal life. Take a quantity of pulverized gypsum (chalk), which is understood to be entirely destitute of animal germs; boil it so that all possible animal life must become extinct; then place it in a glass jar containing a pint of boiled water, about eight ounces of gypsum, and seal the jar hermetically. An iron rod, however, should be descended through the cork into the mixture and project into the air some eight or ten inches.

Place this jar in a room of about seventy degrees temperature, and in some four weeks you will see clinging to the sides of the glass three or four species of moths. Now take the matter from the jar and boil it again; then place it as before, in the same temperature, and within six weeks three different forms of crawling animalcula, very unlike the first, will come from the same combination of water and gypsum.

– A.J. Davis

From Fire-Mist to Man: Evolution Spiritually Interpreted

nessed by several spectators who confirmed that Andrew performed such psychic feats as diagnosing illnesses and suggesting treatments.

That marked the beginning of his unusual career as a clairvoyant. Within a few years his reputation quickly spread and eventually reached Europe. For a time Davis provided diagnostic/

treatment readings free, but at the suggestion of his spirit guides he began requesting a small fee from persons who could afford to pay. His guides were also responsible for his later decision to sever ties with Levingston. He then joined forces with Dr. S. S. Lyon, who left a comfortable medical practice to team up with Davis, touring New York and other areas giving clairvoyant medical diagnoses and lecturing. During the tour, Davis decided to preserve his trance commentaries by having them recorded, and the Reverend William Fishbough, a Universalist minister, became his stenographer.

He often spoke of spirit guides and at age 18 declared that the Almighty had placed two guides at his disposal – the Greek physician Galen and the Swedish philosopher-mystic Emanuel Swedenborg. Arthur Conan Doyle observed that Davis “saw an arrangement of the universe which corresponds closely with that which Swedenborg already noted ...” Davis called Galen his “guiding spirit.” Yet, he apparently did not function as a channel in the usual sense of the term. “Spirits have aided me many times,” he wrote on another occasion, “but they do not control either my person or my reason.” He informed readers, “My information is not derived from any persons that exist in the sphere into which my mind enters, but it is the result of a Law of truth emanating from the Great Positive Mind, and pervading all spheres of existence.” This Law, he claimed, allowed him to “pass from the body with a desire for a particular kind of information. This desire attracts the particular kind of truth of which I would be informed, separates it from all other things, and causes it to flow into mind.”

He may have been unschooled, but in a trance state the Poughkeepsie seer tapped a vast reservoir of knowledge, including Latin and Greek names of medicines and anatomical parts of the human body, just as Cayce did. “He used the terms and phraseology of astronomy, chemistry, and physics and dealt confidently with the different stages of geological development of the earth,” according to Amy Pearce Ver Nooy, writing in the 1947 yearbook of the Dutchess County (New York) Historical Society. And a Hebrew scholar of the time wrote, “I can solemnly affirm that I have heard Davis

correctly quote the Hebrew language in his lectures ...” Over the years, the wisdom of Andrew Jackson Davis would fill 30 volumes. Five books comprised *The Great Harmonia*, which he considered his most significant work.

Davis provided a fascinating glimpse into how he wrote *Nature's Divine Revelations* and other works. Referring to himself in the third person – as Cayce did at times – he revealed in a letter that his many volumes were not dictated while in a trance state, but after he “descended from the exalted mental state down into the physical organism, approximating the natural or normal condition common to all persons when in their ordinary states; because, while in profound trance or Superior Condition, he could neither move his tongue to speak nor control his hand to write. His memory was wonderfully illuminated and thus afterwards he could speak or write all facts as impressions obtained.”

The mind as the keystone of human existence and destiny was an essential part of the philosophy that issued from the clairvoyant. Several decades before Cayce's observations that “thoughts are things” and “mind is the builder,” Davis observed, “The mind is the ruler of the body.” He lauded the “well-balanced mind” and stated: “Such minds see that no truth is dangerous, that no error is safe ... They do not surrender themselves to idleness and do not adopt a life of vanity ...”

The Poughkeepsie seer was known during most of his adult life as a spiritualist and clairvoyant healer, prescribing individualized treatments for patients to follow. But he also served as a hands-on healer at times. He explained that “‘laying on of hands’ is only effective when the patient's mind is receptive.”

When it came to offering cures for physical maladies, Davis gave a new meaning to unorthodoxy even by today's standards of alternative medicine. His cure for a deaf patient, for example, was to have the man wrap the warm skins of rats around each ear nightly for a period of time – a peculiar application said to have restored the patient's hearing. In another case of deafness, he told the patient that a portion of the hind legs of 32 weasels should be boiled and the oil used “one drop at a time in each ear twice a day till the whole is gone – when you will be nicely cured.” Reportedly the pa-

tient replied, “I'll remain as I am.”

The sweep of the seer's revelations was extensive. Even before the discovery of the planet Neptune, he declared that not only an eighth planet existed, but also a ninth (Pluto's existence was confirmed in 1930). In *Penetralia*, published in 1856, he predicted the development of modern transportation and referred to horseless and steamless vehicles: “Carriages will be moved by a strange and beautiful and simple admixture of aqueous and atmospheric gases – so easily condensed, so simply ignited, and so imparted by a machine somewhat resembling our engines, as to be entirely concealed and manageable between the forward wheels.” He also foresaw flight, saying, “aerial cars ... will move through the sky from country to country; and their beautiful influence will produce a universal brotherhood of acquaintance.”

Davis's philosophical commentaries compose a vast and elaborate landscape of established knowledge spliced with unusual revelations about the interrelationship of nature, spirit, and humanity, as well as standards of conduct and moral responsibilities. His readings seem to advance a materialistic as well as a pantheistic philosophy, yet this was not Davis's intent; he perceived all realms of existence as having



Mary F. Davis, his second wife whom he married in 1853.

a spiritual origin, and he rejected the idea of nonexistence. More than likely he had no choice but to rely on physical imagery to help explain what he perceived while in a trance state, as in

the following description of pre-Creation: "In the beginning Matter and Power existed inseparable as a Whole." In addition, "this great Mass of matter abounded with immense heat and fire, each particle was in reality not such, but the Whole was a mass of liquid lava." Humans were not created directly by God, but from "Nature's matrix" as "Every atom, every element, every essence, every mineral, vegetable organization in Nature aspired to become Man!"

Although spiritually guided, Davis was not religious in the orthodox sense. He shunned "Documentary Religion," as he termed any faith founded on dogma, which in his view was not true religion. Nor did he subscribe to the literal interpretation of the Bible. Through his clairvoyant investigation, Davis declared that true religion is innate in a person, not imposed from without and "not absorbed, as a sponge drinks water." This view matched his contention "that all theology is a despotic theory, *an opinion*; and nothing more." As for Davis's teaching, Doyle observed, "It was ... on a very high moral and intellectual level, and might be best described as an up-to-date Christianity with Christ's ethics applied to modern problems and entirely freed from all trace of dogma."

Davis's revelations are at times scholarly commentaries sprinkled with Latinate terminology, while at others the delivery flows with poetic descriptions. Unlike Cayce's psychic discourses, the bulk of which comprise physical readings, the Davis material is heavily philosophical. A reader might gather that few metaphysical stones were left unturned in the quest for answers. For instance, it is perhaps an ageless question to wonder whether there are limits to God's power, but Davis gave this puzzling reply: "God is not sufficiently powerful to accomplish self-destruction. There are, therefore, necessities to omnipotence." Intriguing assertions also were made regarding other planets in our solar system, among them: "Organic beings" lived on Saturn for many millennia until the creation of Earth, "for which reason they have attained a higher development." Davis reported that Mars and Jupiter are populated with human inhabitants "composed of finer elements than the man of Earth and remain in

their physical forms for a short period only – an average of 30 years."

Of the stones left untouched by Davis's clairvoyant reach, one stands out conspicuously: reincarnation. His writings fail to mention souls experiencing repeated lifetimes on Earth. Instead, he unfolds a different script, an account of the soul's ongoing existence through a hierarchy of spiritual spheres (or dimensions) that begins with earthly life, the only physical life as we know it. After life on Earth, spirits take up residence in the Second Sphere, which "contains all the beauties of the first, combined and perfected." He added that no spirit has ever progressed beyond the second, although he provided a general description of all the spheres, each of which is in a more refined and harmonious state than the one before. But when *all* spirits reach the Sixth Sphere, God will create a new universe, opening new spheres of existence. And at that point, will we have ascended to heaven at last? According to Davis, "It follows that the spirit will have no final home, because rest would be intolerable to an immortal being, but the spirit will progress eternally. It will be always in harmony with surrounding circumstances, and so will dwell always in heaven."

From all accounts, Andrew Jackson Davis maintained an unequivocal integrity toward his work and remained faithfully committed to helping others throughout his life. He rejected all attempts to sway him into using his clairvoyance for trivial purposes. During a trip aboard a ferry, he was recognized by a stranger who asked him to predict the result of an upcoming lottery with an offer of half the winning. Davis replied he would not entertain such a proposal any more than he would highway robbery. Ver Nooy reported that whenever Davis was asked why he didn't use his powers to improve his financial status, he would reply that "his powers were ... for the betterment of his fellow beings and should not be exerted in an effort to gain something for himself."

Spiritualism was quite popular in the nineteenth century and drew widespread attention, not all of it positive. Opponents of the movement flung charges, among others, that it promoted infidelity and free love. (Cayce, charged with heresy by his church,

'You Ain't Worth Your Salt!'

In his autobiography, The Magic Staff, Andrew Jackson Davis reports a family quarrel after they moved into a tenant house near the blacksmith shop in Hyde Park, where his father secured work in a "boot and shoe manufactory."

I was now in my 11th year. So far as the development of either body or mind was concerned, however, I was considerably behind most boys four or five years younger. Timid, sensitive, prone to solitary rambles, and meditative at times, I was quite disinclined to seek the companionship of village-boys, or to participate in their rough-and-tumble sports. In view of this seeming apathy and worthlessness, I do not treasure up any unkindness toward my energetic and working father because of his frequent exclamation – "You ain't worth your salt!"

To which my maternal protector and ready advocate would reply: "Don't scold the boy! What can you expect of a child?"

"A child! Poh! Before I got to that 'are boy's age, I was bound out for my victuals and clothes," the father would rejoin, "and I don't see that he's any better than I was. I won't bear it. He's old enough to help support himself. You, sir!" he continued, addressing himself to me, "keep a sharp lookout for somebody who wants a boy."

Accordingly, I went in quest of employment, and succeeded in procuring a situation with our landlord. He owned a large flour and plaster mill in

wrote in his memoirs that "some of these church people said those close to things psychic are inclined to free love.")

As one of Spiritualism's primary spokesmen, if not its prophet, Davis probably did not help matters, considering the Victorian climate of the time, by twice marrying women who divorced their husbands to wed him. His

the village, and wanted "a boy to tend hopper." Seated by the horizontal grinding-stones, my business was to see that the grain fell steadily from the containing-box above into the revolving pulverizers below. This monotonous occupation required not the least exercise of intellect, and scarcely none of my muscular system, save the right arm, and that too leisurely to keep one from dreaming and absent-mindedness.

Although not more distant than an hour's walk from my mother's side, yet I could not resist the enervating melancholy of homesickness. When I went to my sleeping-place in the landlord's garret, and got under the buffalo-skin for the night, my thoughts would fly to the dearest object I knew on earth – my mother! And now, somnambulism – more commonly called sleepwalking – began to show itself in my nightly exercises. A thousand shadowy forms of wheels and revolving upright shafts would cover the entire surface of my brain. Besides those mill-works which I had seen during the day, I could perceive and comprehend the operation of new structures. Complete machines for splitting shingles, for grinding grains, for pulverizing plaster-stones for sawing and planing boards, for doing the drudging kitchen work usually imposed upon woman – these and several other very novel representations of mechanical improvements would weave themselves into the substance of my daily experiences – all brought together, and yet never confounded, during the silence of the bending and brooding night.

first marriage, at age 22, was to Catherine DeWolfe Dodge, who was 20 years older than he. By his account, the relationship for the most part seems to have been platonic. She had been a contributor to his work well before their marriage, and when she died a few years later, in 1853, she left him all her property. His marriage to Mary

Love two years later turned out to be an even more awkward state of affairs, because Mary's divorce was granted in Indiana, but not recognized by New York. So, as Ver Nooy wrote, "when Mr. Love wished to re-marry, he obtained a divorce within (New York), branding her marriage to Davis as bigamous, to the considerable embarrassment of Mr. and Mrs. Davis. Nearly 30 years later, in 1884, Davis used the same grounds to have the marriage to Mary annulled."

If his marriages raised some eyebrows, his public meetings aroused occasional outbursts and denunciations from opponents of Spiritualism. But

Andrew Jackson Davis's library was purchased by the A.R.E. Library in 1977 from an heir for \$2500. It consists of 33 books, including an autographed copy of *The Magic Staff* and all of the other books and 150 letters written by Davis.

it's difficult to imagine any experience giving him more pause than a painful moment in a Quincy, Massachusetts, cemetery when he gazed at a headstone and read the epitaph: "In memory of John and Hannah Greaves, deluded by the writing of A.J. Davis." A book by Davis had been found among the Greaveses' possessions.

Another detractor was the Reverend A. Mahan, "First President of Cleveland University," as he was billed in his 1855 book *Modern Mysteries, Explained and Exposed*. Mahan vented his considerable intellect against the *Principles of Nature*, published when Davis was 20 years old – "... he claims to be possessed of a power hardly less than omniscient ... [and yet] our seer evinces the profoundest ignorance of the most palpable and generally known laws of matter ..." Mahan also attacked the seer's "reliability as a narrator of facts" and here, perhaps, may have done the most damage.

In his book, Davis mentioned the Bible's book of Nehemiah and added that for "a truthful understanding" of its contents and that of other prophetic Old Testament books, "I would refer the reader to the theological writings of Swedenborg ... especially to the valuable work entitled *Summaria Expositio Sensus Prophetici*." Mahan quickly

noted that Swedenborg never wrote a book under this title and never wrote about Nehemiah.

Swedenborg, it's true, never specifically addressed the book of Nehemiah, but Davis did not say he had. Swedenborg, in fact, produced a work under the title in question, which was published posthumously, according to William Woofenden, director of the Swedenborg Foundation in West Chester, Pennsylvania. Apparently Mahan didn't stop to consider that a clairvoyant might be privy to information not yet made public in the U.S.

Skeptics did not deter Davis, who not only continued his psychic work but during his mid-fifties earned a diploma from United States Medical College, New York. At 57 years of age, he registered

as a physician in both New York and Massachusetts, and practiced medicine in Boston. He also received a doctorate in anthropology – quite an accomplishment for a man who had reckoned himself as dull and backward in his youth. If mundane schooling could not ignite his mind, then exposure to things psychic had succeeded in expanding his intellect. Of course, dialogues with the spirits of Galen and Swedenborg no doubt helped fuel his thinking.

Yet there is some uncertainty about how he spent his final years. By the time he reached 82 years of age, he had been a medical doctor for 25 years, and one account claimed he practiced medicine until his death in 1910 at age 84. Doyle, on the other hand, wrote, "The last years of his life he spent as keeper of some small bookstore in Boston." Perhaps he was occupied with both pursuits.

Since his death, Davis, unlike Cayce, has received only passing notice, and apparently his psychic commentaries have attracted even less. There is a brief mention of him, however, in the Cayce biography, *There Is a River*. Author Thomas Sugrue writes that after Cayce's son Hugh Lynn read him a sketchy account of Davis's life and work, Edgar Cayce observed, "He sounds so much like me it gives me the creeps!" 