



A man of contradictions: Sir Charles Nicholson and Victorian Spiritualism

Recent research into the life of Sir Charles Nicholson for a forthcoming Nicholson Museum exhibition has thrown some light onto a hitherto little known side of the man, writes Dr Craig Barker, Manager Education and Public Programs.

Nicholson was in every way a man of the Victorian era – a supporter of science, a patron of the arts and education, a scholar of history and religion, and pillar of the Anglican church. And yet he was also apparently a believer in spiritualism; a fascinating contradiction of ideals and opinions.

The exhibition *Charles Nicholson: The Man and his Museum, 1808–2008* opens on 5 November. It celebrates the bicentennial of the birth of a man who is a key figure in the history of the University and the early days of the Sydney colony during his time here between 1834 and 1862, before he returned to England.

Nicholson's contribution to the University is well known. He served as the first Provost (Chancellor), and second Vice-Provost (Vice-Chancellor), founded the archaeological museum that bears his name with a gift of antiquities for "the illustration of various branches of historical, philological and classical enquiry", was the first major benefactor to the University's art collection, sponsored many of the stained glass windows in the Great Hall and elsewhere in the Quadrangle, and donated numerous books and manuscripts to the library. His resume of career achievements is equally impressive. He was a medical doctor, a wealthy landowner and pastoralist, a politician, a shrewd businessman, an archaeologist, a collector and connoisseur of the arts.

In 1956, historian David McMillan wrote that Nicholson was "a subject who will surely gladden the heart of some biographer of the future". Yet over five decades later a major biography has still to be completed.

Large mysteries about his life still remain. A fire at Nicholson's house at Totteridge, north of London, in February 1899 destroyed much of his paperwork and diaries, leaving only tantalising glimpses of his inner thoughts in surviving letters and the fragmentary recollections of friends and contemporaries.

One of the discoveries that may appear peculiar to a modern audience is Nicholson's interest in spiritualism. We first became aware of Nicholson's interest through his allusions to spiritualism in surviving letters to his friend Alexander Berry, held in the Mitchell Library.

The Victorian spiritualist movement began in the 1840s and soon flourished. By 1897 there were said to be over eight million followers in the United States and Europe, mostly from the middle and upper classes. In some circles spiritualism developed into a social pastime based around frivolous tea party séances, but there was a more philosophical audience, and it is to this group that Nicholson belonged.

Spiritualism divided audiences and commentators. One Victorian critic dismissed it as "monstrous folly". However, within the context of the social milieu, spiritualism was a focal point for the many conflicting



Séance with Eusapia Palladino, Paris, November 1898. Photo: Société astronomique de France Photo: The University of Sydney archives



Sir Charles and Lady Sarah Nicholson at home, 1890s

“We now know that Nicholson arranged for Home to conduct séances in his own home. In his correspondence with the medium, Nicholson wrote: “My Dear Mr Home, ... be assured that the pleasure of cultivating social intercourse, and of enjoying your society, will always be regarded as a privilege by me, irrespective of curiosity regarding the wonderful phenomena which I may have an opportunity of witnessing in your presence. Ever most faithfully yours, Charles Nicholson.”

dynamics within Victorian society. It was an era in which traditional religion was threatened not just by the rise of scientific rationalism and Darwinian theories, but also the advent of evangelicalism.

One of the most celebrated 19th century spiritualists was Daniel Dunglas Home. Home conducted over a thousand séances, many attended by well-known Victorian personages. He was reputed to have the ability to levitate, speak with the dead, and make phantom hands appear. His most famous performance was in December 1868, when he was said to have levitated out of the third-storey window of one room and back into the window of an adjoining room.

Despite his fame and popularity, Home attracted much criticism and was widely suspected to be a fraud, though nothing was ever proven. Novelist William Makepeace Thackeray dismissed Home's proclaimed abilities as "dire humbug" and "dreary and foolish superstition." The poet Robert Browning (who derided spiritualism in a sarcastic poem *Mr Sludge 'The Medium'*), described Home as a "dungball" after witnessing him in action and threatened to throw him down the stairs. His wife Elizabeth Barrett Browning, however, was convinced by what she saw, and so were many others. Among Home's most vocal supporters was Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, creator of Sherlock Holmes.

Conan Doyle became involved with spiritualism following the deaths of his son and brother in World War I. In his book *The History of Spiritualism* (1926), Conan Doyle gives an account of a séance by the medium Brothers

Davenport in 1864, attended by various prominent figures including "Sir Charles Nicholson, the Chancellor of the University of Sydney".

Additional proof of Nicholson's interest can be found in the writings of Home's widow. Madame Dunglas Home confirms his presence at a number of séances with Home, and claims he "was entirely convinced of the genuineness of the manifestations ... but he could not summon up courage to make his convictions public".

Contemporary letters provide more insight. Mrs SC Hall, who attended a dinner party with Nicholson at the Larnock's in Kensington Palace Gardens, wrote that "Sir Charles Nicholson began about Spiritualism, he is now a perfect believer ... and fought it out bravely with the Larnocks." Mrs Hall later proclaimed, "I think he is a very sincere Spiritualist".

In 1903, following Nicholson's death, his close friend Baroness Deichmann wrote that his "firm belief in the truths of spiritualism, and the great conviction it brings of the certainty of the spiritual world was a great bond of union between us", particularly in the aftermath of her own husband's death.

Nicholson's spiritualism may seem at odds with his firm Anglican faith and reputation as a supporter of scientific and historical thought. But one needs to remember that he was a thoroughly Victorian man. The intellectual curiosity of the age drove him, along with many of the others in his circle, to explore different ideas. These letters provide glimpses of a previously unknown aspect of Nicholson's life; one that tantalisingly remains to be explored in depth.