

History of Modern Spiritualism

Modern Spiritualism as a religion developed in the 19th century within a larger spiritual and mystic resurgence based on such influences as earlier mysticism, Emanuel Swedenborg's writings and North American native beliefs. Through the work of 18th-century Austrian physician F.A. Mesmer, trance and clairvoyance had become familiar. In the mid-19th century Andrew Jackson Davis and Phineas P. Quimby were especially important to the development of spiritualism and other spiritual movements. Theosophy has been an important substantial influence on the subsequent development of Spiritualism.

The origin of the 19th century Spiritualist movement is credited to 2 sisters, Margaret and Kate Fox (aka Margaretta and Catherine or Kate) of Hydesville, NY. Their ages are given in various sources from 10 and 7 up to 15 and 12 respectively. They began to communicate with the spirit of a peddler through rapping noises on 31 March 1848. The family had previously lived in the Belleville area, Canada West, but moved into the Hydesville house in December 1847. An older sister, Leah (married 3 times: Fish, Brown, Underhill), who also developed mediumship abilities, lived in Rochester, NY, and Margaret and Kate went to live with her there a short time after the rappings began.

Through the publicity given the Fox sisters' spirit rappings, interest in Spiritualism spread rapidly and was in Canada by 1850. The oldest sister of Margaret and Kate, Elizabeth Ousterhout, remained in Canada West in Consecon, near Belleville. Kate, her mother, and probably Margaret visited Elizabeth in 1854 and 1855, stimulating more interest in Spiritualism around the towns of Consecon and Bloomfield. While there Kate met the Canadian writer Susanna Moodie, who was deeply impressed with her clairvoyant abilities.

Spiritualists were especially active in Montréal, Toronto, London, Ottawa, St Catharines and Bloomfield. There was a phenomenal spread of spiritualism across the US in the 1850s and it probably reached BC from there at least by 1870. It arrived in Britain in 1852 and spread throughout the continent.

Although initially Spiritualists were organized into investigative associations and societies, during WWI they began to establish churches. Today the 2 major Canadian parent associations to which some churches belong are the Spiritualist

Church of Canada and the International Spiritualist Alliance. Most, however, remain independent. Walter Meyer zu Erpen has documented 47 churches or groups in 6 provinces of Canada in 1994. BC has 11, Alberta has 3, Manitoba has 2, Ontario 25, Québec 4 and Nova Scotia one.

In Canada most Spiritualists have been in Ontario followed by BC, Alberta, Manitoba and Québec, but the number of people claiming to be spiritualist has always been small. The 1901 Canadian census counted 616, which grew to 2263 in 1931, perhaps as a partial response to the high death rates during WWI and the 1918-19 influenza pandemic. The figures dropped to 1214 in 1941. Spiritualists were not listed as a separate category again until 1981, when there were 1940.

Significantly, by the 1991 census there were 3735. In recent years individuals in the Mystical Movement and New Age are becoming involved with spiritualism, often attending services and, more importantly, development circles. This has contributed to the largest recorded number of spiritualists thus far in Canada. In November 1995 the Gateway Centre Spiritualist Church in Calgary opened a home page on the World Wide Web with information about beliefs and the churches. This kind of innovation may contribute to an even greater resurgence in interest in Spiritualism in the future.

A number of prominent people have been Spiritualist or have shown a deep interest in Spiritualism while retaining their traditional religious affiliations. Two of the best known are Sir Arthur Conan Doyle and Prime Minister Mackenzie King.

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