

Back From Jerusalem:

The Life and Times of
Emma Hardinge Britten,
Spiritualist Propagandist

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The Emma Hardinge Britten Archive

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Module 12

What EHB Believed,
And What She Left Us

Yes, but what did she actually
believe?

What EHB Believed

- Emma was a propagandist, and proud of it
- She was on the side of Gorgias, rather than Socrates -- she pleaded her client's case, using all means at her disposal
- And she was always aware of the fact that there was an audience, that she was "on stage"
- And that the past is always present
- She didn't tell whoppers, but she did prevaricate, shape, and elide
- Knowing what was "in her heart," as we like to say, at any time, is impossible, without her papers (and perhaps impossible with her papers)



Emma and Joey

What EHB Believed

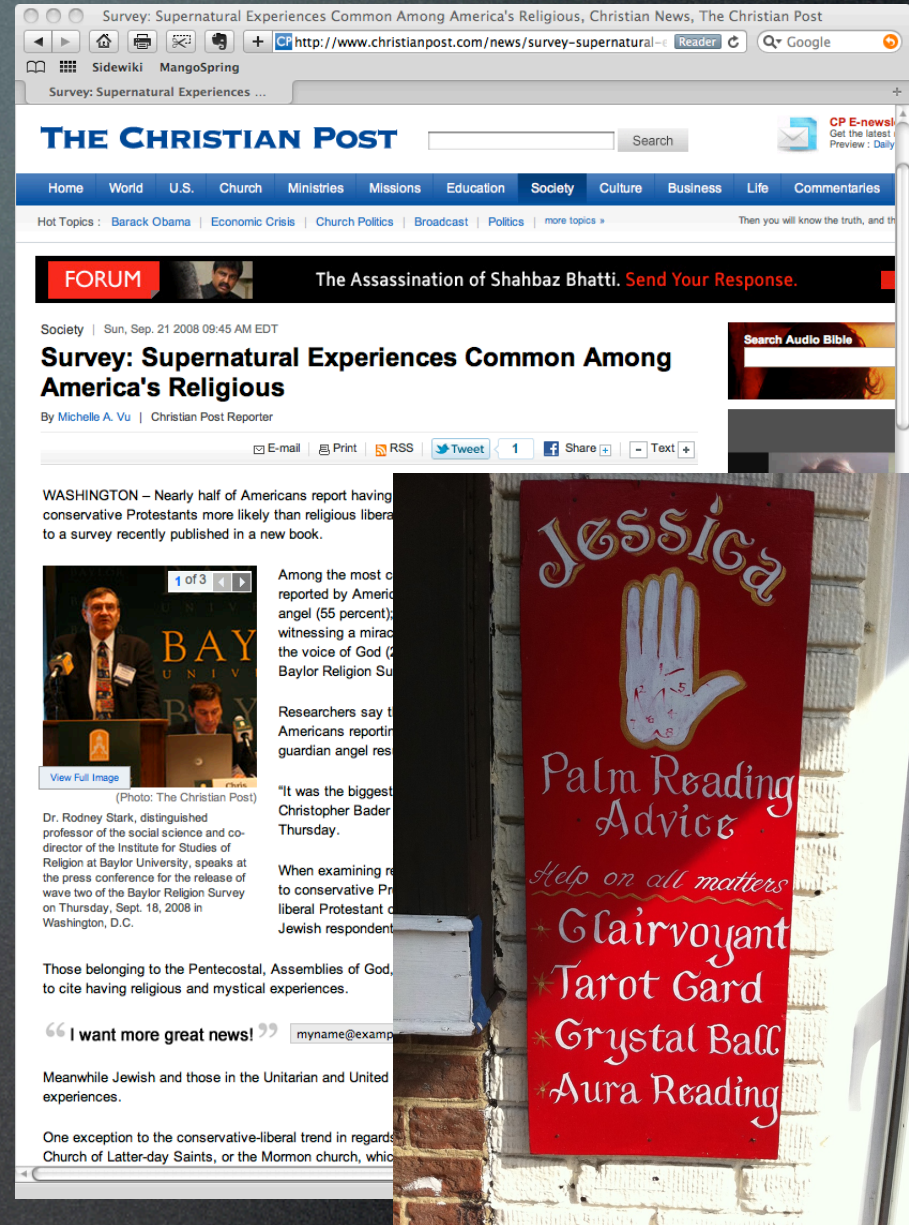
- Her core beliefs -- or at least the themes she returned to, again and again, from different angles and with different degrees of precision -- are encapsulated in Six Lectures, Art Magic and Faiths, Facts & Frauds
- The Creed of the Spirits is Emma, regardless of its origin
- Her political principals are embodied in the Home for Outcast Women, the School for Prophets, and her overtly political writings
 - Incremental reform, enlightened self-interest, private philanthropy --> perfectibility
- She did believe in the existence of a lost wisdom tradition, but she could not follow its threads back in historical time -- because she was insufficiently well-educated (and, when she relied on secondary sources, she paid the price, in public, for doing so)
- She was all about replacing what she saw as a repressive, destructive Christian tradition with **a new religion, premised on the survival of personality after death, and perfectibility** -- a scientific (as she saw it) faith

What EHB Left Us

- Her body of work is probably interesting mostly for how it was used by those who came after her
 - Including, but not limited to, Burgoyne & Davidson and the HBoFL
- What she means, to modernity, is of course highly personal, but, for me:
 - She was a lone intelligent de-classed female
 - Making her (economic and emotional) way on the frontiers of knowledge and capitalism, advocating for marginal discourses
 - At a time of great, systemic change in Anglo-American culture
 - And she found herself, with other strong, smart women, leading an international movement -- a new religion
 - New Thought, New Occult, New Age -- she and her peers carved the channel that allowed the emptying of the river of the occult into the sea of modern culture -- theoretically, mechanically, structurally

What EHB Left Us

- The supernatural has become natural, commonplace perhaps
- “Spiritual, but not religious” is a legitimate denomination
- Much of what Emma believed -- “magnetism and psychology” in the main -- survive in our cultural discourse and in our own individual world-views - we just use different terminology
- Science has compromised anyone’s ability to claim, as Emma did, the hard, high ground of “facts,” but we are all, to some extent, her children...



Coda

Where Spiritualism
is concerned,
we are...Victorians.

I open my mouth for the dumb; and let it be recollected, that I write in defence of youth and old age, of female delicacy, modesty, and tenderness, not only of man and of manhood—sundered up in weakness to indecent exposure, disgusting outrage, or uncalled for violence—that I write for the few who are objects of suspicion and alarm,—to society, who too much engrossed in business or in pleasure to exercise reflection, are equally capable of treating these objects of their dread and insolence, with lunatic cruelty, and the insanest mismanagement; being deprived, like them, of understanding, by exaggerated and unreasonable fear, but not like them by illness, of the guilt of their misconduct. The subject to which I direct attention, is also one on which, my readers, according to man's wont, the wisest of you are hasty to decide in action, or to hazard an opinion in proportion even to your ignorance.

In the name of humanity, then, in the name of modesty, in the name of wisdom, I intreat you to place yourselves in the position of those whose sufferings I describe, before you attempt to discuss what course is to be pursued towards them. Feel for them; try to defend them. Be their friends,—argue not hostilely. Feeling the ignorance to be in one sense real, which all of you confess on your lips, listen to one who can instruct you. Bring the ears and the minds of children, children as you are, or pretend to be, in knowledge—not believing without questioning, but questioning that you may believe.

John Thomas Perceval (1803-1876), from Perceval's Narrative (ed. Gregory Bateson)