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First prepared in October 2006 by the Survival Research Institute of Canada (Debra Barr and Walter Meyer zu Erpen). Capitalization of any name or subject in the text below indicates that you will find an entry on that topic in the forthcoming third edition of Rosemary Ellen Guiley's *Encyclopedia of Ghosts and Spirits* (October 2007).

Austin, Benjamin Fish (1850-1933)

Methodist minister, editor, author, Spiritualist lecturer, publisher and clergyman. Benjamin Fish Austin was born in Brighton, Canada West (now Ontario), on 21 September 1850, the son of Benjamin F. Austin and Mary Ann McGuire. Educated at common and grammar schools, Austin began work as a teacher, apparently while still a teenager. He entered the ministry in 1871 and was ordained by the Methodist Episcopal Church about 1872, serving charges first at Prescott, then at Metropolitan Church in Ottawa. His formal, higher education seems to have followed, with graduation (BA) from Albert College, Belleville, in 1877, and a divinity degree (BD) from Victoria College, Cobourg, in 1881. Later, Victoria University granted him an honorary doctor of divinity degree (DD).¹

As a young Methodist clergyman, Austin edited a volume of sermons by Ontario ministers entitled *The Methodist Episcopal Church Pulpit* (1879), and contributed to another similar volume (1878). The following year he wrote *Popular Sins* (1880), comprising sermons against the sins of the times, including corrupt election practices.

On 16 June 1881, at Prescott, Austin married Frances Amanda Connell, and the couple moved to St. Thomas, Ontario, where he had been appointed first Principal of the newly established Alma College for women. The Austins' four children were born at St. Thomas.

As Principal, Austin continued his writing and publication, with some of his views becoming gradually more progressive. His lecture *The Higher Christian Education of Women* (1882) on the opening of the college was followed by a volume of essays about the need for increased opportunity of education for women that he edited: *Woman: Her Character, Culture and Calling* (1890). A revised edition, *Woman: Maiden, Wife and Mother* (1898), was prepared for the Canadian Council of Women and the Victorian Order of Nurses. Austin's Protestant beliefs are prevalent in *The Jesuits: Their Origin, History, Aims, Principles, Immoral Teaching, Their Expulsions from Various Lands and Condemnation by Roman Catholic and Protestant Authorities* (1889, 1890), which is an anti-Jesuit tract.

¹Austin's honorary degree is variously dated 1892 and 1896, though the latter is the more likely year based upon a Victoria University list of graduates.

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Austin's concern about social issues and the attendant religious implications became evident in *The Gospel to the Poor Versus Pew Rents* (1884) about church property and the pew system. His interest in the human psyche becomes apparent in *Rational Memory Training* (1894). In support of the temperance movement, he wrote *The Plebiscite* (ca. 1894) about the vote to be held on the abolition of the liquor traffic. There followed a two-volume collection of speeches and articles that Austin edited, *The Prohibition Leaders of America* (1895) and *The Temperance Leaders of America* (1896). Austin's published writings between 1878 and 1898 reflect an increasing liberalism.

In 1897, Austin resigned his position as Principal, citing personal reasons. Though successful at increasing student enrollment, his achievements as an administrator were lacking in other areas, especially the fund-raising required to pay the costs of the expanded facilities that were needed. Austin's publishing ventures while at Alma College had proven costly and may have contributed to his departure as Principal.

Upon leaving Alma College, Austin moved to Toronto where he wrote *Glimpses of the Unseen: A Study of Dreams, Premonitions, Prayers, and Remarkable Answers, Hypnotism, Spiritualism, Telepathy, Apparitions, Peculiar Mental and Spiritual Experiences, Unexplained Psychical Phenomena* (1898). In this massive volume, based upon years of study and investigation, he was expressing already the conviction that there exists a great deal of natural phenomena that could only be explained as being "caused by the spirits of the dead."

Austin's initial inquiries into SPIRITUALISM were later attributed to interest in psychic phenomena among Alma College students.² The death of his two-year old daughter Kathleen in March 1896 may have added impetus to his search.

Austin's belief in SURVIVAL AFTER DEATH and the possibility of communication with SPIRIT became known through publication of *Glimpses of the Unseen* and through a sermon he preached on 8 January 1899 as a visitor to a Methodist congregation in Toronto. In June 1899, the London Conference of the Methodist Church found Austin guilty of heresy and expelled him from its ministry.

In his three-hour defence of his belief in Spiritualism, Austin cited the personal experiences of psychic phenomena that John Wesley had accepted as evidence

²E. Lee Howard, "Benjamin F. Austin—In Memoriam," *Reason*, vol. 24, no. 4 (February 1933): 7.

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of spirit return, as the “only possible explanation of the genuine phenomena.”³ For Austin too, spirit communication was the only theory that could account for the phenomena he had witnessed.

Austin resigned from the church and became a full-time advocate of Spiritualism. While at Toronto, he began the Austin Publishing Company, which continued at Rochester, New York, from about 1904, and then at Los Angeles, after 1913. Over 32 years, Austin published at least 50 mostly Spiritualist or psychic titles by other authors, in addition to his reprints of a large number of works by the Poughkeepsie seer, ANDREW JACKSON DAVIS. The first book published was his friend Flora MacDonald's fictionalized biography of her psychic sister Mary Merrill, titled *Mary Melville: The Psychic* (1900). Another early title was *The Angel and the Book* (1902), authored by Herbert G. Paull who in 1908 joined Dr. JOHN SUMPTER KING in the Canadian Society for Psychical Research. The books published reflect the progressive and esoteric nature of Austin's venture, including serious, romantic, and extra-terrestrial titles, some of which would today be considered fantasy or science fiction: John Maclean, *Modern Science and the Christian Bible* (1901); Sir William Crookes, *Researches into the Phenomena of Modern Spiritualism* (1904 reprint edition); Sara Weiss, *Journeys to the Planet Mars* (1905); Hiram Corson, *Spirit Messages* (1911); J. Ben Leslie, *Submerged Atlantis Restored* (1911); Annette Leevier, *Psychic Experiences of an Indian Princess* (1920); Reverend Andrew Malcolm Morrison, *Efficiency of Life at 100 Years and More* (1921); Professor G.E. Bartholomew, *Reincarnation* (1921); Charles Henry Taylor, *By Wireless from Venus* (1922); Cary S. Cox, *The Cause and Control of Sex* (1923); Ada White Taylor, *The Mystic Spell: A Metaphysical Romance* (1923); Julia A. Coe, *Numerology: A Study in Self-Mastery* (1924); James Joseph Fitzgerrell, *Lincoln was a Spiritualist* (1924); J.L. Dryden, *Mona: Queen of Lost Atlantis* (1925); Samuel A. Jacoby, *The Immortality of the Soul* (1931); and John Wesley, *News from the Invisible World* (undated, but while Austin was at Los Angeles, with an introduction by J.J. Morse; reprint of letters and other writings by John Wesley).

Beginning with *What Converted Me to Spiritualism: One Hundred Testimonies* (ca. 1901), Austin Publishing Company became also the outlet for his own writings. Despite Austin's many titles expounding on various aspects of Spiritualism, few copies of his works have survived, probably due more to their softcover format than to the number of copies in circulation at the time. Among the dozen or so known pamphlets and booklets authored by Austin are: *The Mission of Spiritualism, and Original Poems* (ca. 1902); *The A.B.C. of*

³Stan McMullin, *Anatomy of a Seance: A History of Spirit Communication in Central Canada* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2004), p. 53, citing *Synopsis of the Heresy Sermon. The Heresy Trial of Rev. B.F. Austin*. Toronto: Sermon Publishing [1899], p. 20.

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Spiritualism: One Hundred of the Questions Most Commonly Asked about Spiritualism, Answered Tersely and Plainly (1920); *Letters to Clergy: On Orthodoxy and Spiritualism. Facts, Philosophy, Scientific Testimony and Bible Teaching* (nd); *Fundamentalism* (1924); *Conundrums for the Orthodox Clergy: One Hundred Questions about the Bible, Revelation and Spiritualism, respectfully Addressed to Believers in the Old Theology* (ca. 1924); and *The Prophet of Nazareth and the Seer of Poughkeepsie: Points of Agreement and Contrast* (nd). One title, *The Mystery of Ashton Hall* (1910), he wrote under the pseudonym Benjamin Nitsua. Austin also authored a psychic novel, *Christ or Barabbas* (1921). *The A.B.C. of Spiritualism* appears to have been the booklet most reprinted by subsequent generations of Spiritualists.

From 1901, Austin published the quarterly *Reason* that ended in 1934 with a final issue edited by his daughter Alma. Beginning in 1926, he also published the *Austin Pulpit Quarterly*. Plagued by debt, Austin Publishing Company ceased operation in 1934; Alma Austin sold the printing plates for the Andrew Jackson Davis imprints to cover debts.

About 1901, Austin became convinced of the authenticity of some SLATE-WRITING as demonstrated to him through the MEDIUMSHIP of medium Fred Evans at New York. Based upon careful observation, he believed that the messages received could not have been fraudulently produced because some of the slates were on the floor out of reach of the medium. In the same report, he stated his belief in the genuineness of MATERIALIZATION phenomena observed through the mediumship of Mrs. Wilcox at Philadelphia, California.

In 1904, Austin moved to Rochester, New York, where he became associated with a Spiritualist group that, with his help, acquired a church building. He served the renamed Plymouth Spiritual Church from approximately 1906 until 1911. Following a 1911 lecture tour in the West, Austin decided to return to California to live, moving to Los Angeles in 1913. The NATIONAL SPIRITUALIST ASSOCIATION OF CHURCHES ordained him to the ministry of Spiritualism in 1914. His remaining years were largely devoted to serving churches in California, sometimes as Pastor. Austin lectured regularly at the Church of Revelation in Los Angeles and during summers visited SPIRITUALIST CAMPS where he lectured and taught classes.

Notwithstanding his steadfast support of Spiritualism, Austin applied critical analysis to spirit phenomena. In August 1919, writing in *Reason* about spirit messages, he explained that “many so-called spirit messages are a mixture of telepathic communications from the sitter or the circle and the outpourings of the subconscious mind of the medium, and furnish no proof whatsoever of originating in some discarnate mind.” Spirit messages are shaped by “the original idea or thought projected from the spirit friend; the modifying influence of the medium’s

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brain and expression, and the modifying influence of the sitter or circle or environment."⁴

After leaving Canada, Austin appears to have made only infrequent return visits. That his activities were known to Canadian Spiritualists is evidenced by the fact that JENNY O'HARA PINCOCK's *Trails of Truth* (1930) was published in Los Angeles by Austin Publishing. That same year, Austin visited St. Catharines, Ontario, where he ordained Pincock's brother-in-law, United Church minister Reverend Fred Maines, into the Spiritualist ministry with results that paralleled his own expulsion from the orthodox ministry thirty years earlier.

Following Austin's death on 22 January 1933 at Los Angeles, the tribute in *The Two Worlds* noted that: "Dr. Austin was a fine lecturer, and travelled extensively in the interest of Spiritualism. He gave class lectures in many cities, and was a favourite at the American Summer Camps. As a publisher of many Spiritualist books, he has left an enviable record, and was beloved and esteemed by all who knew him, and they were legion."⁵

For thirty years, Austin was an editor and leading publisher of Spiritualist and occult literature in North America. In addition to his own booklets, he published over 50 titles by other authors on a wide variety of topics, as well as reprints of many of Andrew Jackson Davis' works. The fluid nature of the Spiritualist movement in America, with little historical consciousness or emphasis on record-keeping, means that much of Austin's life's work is virtually unknown.

Further Reading:

Austin, B.F. *Glimpses of the Unseen: A Study of Dreams, Premonitions, Prayers, and Remarkable Answers, Hypnotism, Spiritualism, Telepathy, Apparitions, Peculiar Mental and Spiritual Experiences, Unexplained Psychical Phenomena; A Book of Personal Experiences, Original and Selected, Related in Their Own Language by Reputable Persons, Together with Running Comments and a Thoughtful Summary.* Toronto and Brantford, Ontario: Bradley-Garretson Company, 1898.

Cook, Ramsay. "Spiritualism, Science of the Earthly Paradise," *Canadian Historical Review* 65, no. 1 (March 1984): 4-27.

McMullin, Stan. *Anatomy of a Seance: A History of Spirit Communication in Central Canada.* Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2004, pp. 42-62.

With assistance from the United Church of Canada/Victoria University Archives, Toronto, Ontario, based upon research in the B.F. Austin family scrapbook (Reference F3007).

⁴B.F. Austin, "Spirit Messages," *Reason*, vol. 16, no. 4 (August 1919): 44.

⁵*The Two Worlds*, vol. 46, no. 2360, (17 February 1933): 123.