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Exploring other worlds: Margaret Fox, Elisha Kane, and the antebellum culture of curiosity

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**EXPLORING OTHER WORLDS:
MARGARET FOX, ELISHA KANE, AND THE
ANTEBELLUM CULTURE OF CURIOSITY**

BY

**DAVID CHAPIN
B.A. Kenyon College, 1988
M.A. Colorado State University, 1993**

DISSERTATION

**Submitted to the University of New Hampshire
in Partial Fulfillment of
the Requirements for the Degree of**

Doctor of Philosophy

in

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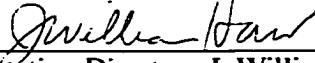
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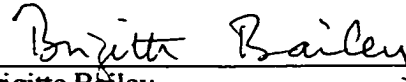
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ABSTRACT

EXPLORING OTHER WORLDS: MARGARET FOX, ELISHA KANE, AND THE ANTEBELLUM CULTURE OF CURIOSITY

by

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University of New Hampshire, May, 2000

Antebellum Americans had a strong interest in the unknown, which manifested itself simultaneously in highbrow, middlebrow, and lowbrow culture. Venues such as scientific institutions, lyceums, lecture halls, the "penny-press," and the dime-museum all catered to American curiosity. *Exploring Other Worlds* examines this "culture of curiosity," arguing that curiosity was a defining trait of antebellum America, transcending many of the boundaries we often associate with the era. Curiosity promoted intellectual interest in science, but it also led to the sensationalism of modern commercial popular culture.

The inter-related lives of Elisha Kane and Margaret Fox demonstrate this thesis. Kane was America's first celebrated Arctic explorer, serving as surgeon on the First Grinnell Expedition (1850-1851) and commanding the Second Grinnell Expedition (1853-1855) in search of the lost British explorer John Franklin. While Kane's expeditions did not succeed in discovering Franklin, his books describing his voyages were very popular. They successfully blended Arctic science with adventure-story sensationalism.

Kane was romantically involved with the spirit-rapper Margaret Fox. Fox was well-known as one of the Fox sisters, whose "mysterious knockings" led to the emergence of Spiritualism in antebellum America. By cracking their toe joints, the Fox sisters convinced many that they could act as "mediums" between the living and the dead. Fox's

spirit-rapping, like Kane's Arctic exploration, mixed science with sensationalism. Various theories about the nature of the mind, such as mesmerism, clairvoyance, and phrenology, fanned the flames of the Fox sisters' sensational rappings. Like Kane, Fox became famous by appealing to an American desire to explore the unknown.

When rumors about the Kane/Fox affair became known, the sensationalism they had inspired in their professional lives spilled over into their personal lives. Once again a "culture of curiosity" defined how they were discussed in public, but this curiosity lost all resemblance to the quasi-scientific curiosity that defined their earlier public lives. It pointed to the commercial sensationalism of a later era.

INTRODUCTION

A CULTURE OF CURIOSITY

Remember then as a sort of dream, that Doctor Kane of the Arctic Seas loved Maggie Fox of the Spirit Rappings.

Elisha Kane to Margaret Fox
*The Love-Life of Dr. Kane.*¹

In February 1853, the Polar explorer, Doctor Elisha Kent Kane, who had recently delivered a popular series of lectures on Arctic science and exploration in a number of American cities, wrote to Margaret Fox, the notorious "spirit-rapper" with whom he was having a secret affair. He told her that, despite their outward differences (of which he was well aware), he at times saw similarities between their respective careers. "When I think of you, dear darling, wasting your time and youth and conscience for a few paltry dollars, and think of the crowds who come nightly to hear of the wild stories of the frozen north, I sometimes feel that we are not so far removed after all."²

Kane was being condescending, for he and Fox differed greatly in status. Elisha Kane was a young man with wonderful prospects. He came from one of the best Philadelphia families, and he mingled in the nation's highest social circles. This short, slightly built young man was quickly becoming known throughout the country for his explorations in the Arctic. He had recently been a member of the United States Grinnell Expedition, which had gone north in search of the lost British navigator, Sir John Franklin. His scientific researches while on that expedition had brought him membership in the prestigious *American Philosophical Society*, and his lectures in eastern cities, including

¹Anonymous, *The Love-Life of Dr. Kane*, (New York: George W. Carleton, 1865), 49.

²*Love-Life*, 62.

Washington, New York, Philadelphia, Baltimore, and Boston, were attracting interested crowds. Soon he was to depart on another voyage of discovery in the Arctic in command of his own expedition.

Margaret Fox, on the other hand, was a figure shrouded in controversy. In 1848, according to some, she and her sister Kate began communicating with spirits by means of mysterious rapping sounds. Two years later, these two pale, dark-eyed teenage girls began to hold seances in New York City. Hundreds of people came to see the Fox sisters and participate in their seances in the hope that, through them, they could contact dead loved ones. Some thought the activity of the Fox sisters heralded the beginning of a new age, while others thought it revealed new mysteries about the workings of the human mind. Still others thought the Fox sisters were con-artists out to make a buck. Regardless of these conflicting views, the Fox sisters were a sensation, and their seances attracted both hopeful believers and skeptical critics.

Margaret Fox and Elisha Kane had significant differences, but when Kane continued in his letter to tell Fox, "my brain and your body are each the sources of attraction, and I confess that there is not so much difference," he was reluctantly pointing to a conjunction of their two careers which moved beyond their personal connection.³ Both of them operated in a new world of mass culture which emphasized educational amusements. The respected explorer and the notorious spirit-rapper were each "attractions" in antebellum America. In order to continue their respective careers, they had to cater to the tastes of the American public. They had audiences who, above all else, wanted to explore the unknown. Antebellum Americans wanted to be both educated and amused by knowledge, be it geographical, spiritual, or even, ultimately, personal. This public curiosity made celebrities out of women and men, like Margaret Fox and Elisha Kane, who helped Americans discover "undiscovered countries."

* * *

³*Love-Life*, 62.

The careers of Margaret Fox and Elisha Kane help to illuminate an antebellum American culture of curiosity. Curiosity is a trait which combines the search for knowledge with the sensation of amusement. Sometimes a virtue while at other times a vice, curiosity is both intellectually and emotionally driven. It can embrace the scientific, the sensational, and the trivial. Antebellum American venues of popular culture appealed to curiosity by promoting all sorts of investigation into the unknown. In doing so they combined the profound with the entertaining in ways which often obscured the differences. Because of this duality, Elisha Kane could emerge from his course of lectures on Arctic geography with ambivalence about the motives that drove men and women to see him speak. He wanted to be a scientist, but in moments of doubt he wondered if, as a mere attraction, he was no better than a spirit-rapper.

The antebellum culture of curiosity, of which Kane and Fox were a part, provided a common link to a number of different arenas of American culture which would later diverge. Three main trends fed into this milieu: an expectation of American progress, a desire for broadly based democratic education available to all citizens, and new modes of popular commercial entertainment which catered to the leisure time of growing middle-class and urban populations. The first two of these had their origins in the republican ideology of the past which saw America as a land of ever expanding virtue. The last was something new, which pointed to the future of American commercial mass culture. Kane and Fox lived in a world of transition between these worlds.

From the early republic through the antebellum era, Americans believed strongly in progress. The legacy of the Revolution taught Americans that the United States was at the forefront of civilization. Most Americans believed that the future would be both morally and materially better than the past. Recent advances seemed to confirm that belief. The transportation revolution had opened up the country to commerce. Science and technology seemed to promise a bright future. Advances in manufactures and in commerce were creating greater wealth. Ideals of freedom and democracy seemed to be expanding.

America had grown on the international scene, and its political ideals seemed to be spreading back to Europe. While there were concerns, anxieties, and debate over the direction that progress would take, especially with the growing sectional divide, the American mood was generally optimistic.⁴

Education was understood to be an important element of American progress. As political rights in the young republic expanded, so did the call for more universal education. Public schooling increased during the early national and antebellum eras for both children and adults. Night schools emerged designed for working class students looking to improve themselves. The lyceum movement grew, with the goal of providing educational and enlightening instruction to people around the country. This was accompanied by new institutions, like the Smithsonian, dedicated to disseminating useful knowledge as widely as possible. The more that education flourished, many believed, the greater would be the moral, intellectual, and spiritual awakening of a democratic nation.⁵

Those who sought to educate the nation about the unknown mysteries of the world, however, could not always be separated from those who sought a profit in the nation's expanding economy. Enlightened education was not always distinct from commercial amusement. As Lawrence Levine has argued, the distinctions between "highbrow" and "lowbrow" culture were not always clear-cut in the antebellum era.⁶ Some, most notably

⁴On the theme of progress see Arthur Alphonse Ekirch, Jr., *The Idea of Progress in America, 1815-1860*. (New York: Peter Smith, 1951); Daniel Feller, *The Jacksonian Promise; America, 1815-1840*, (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995); David Brion Davis, eds., *Antebellum American Culture: An Interpretive Anthology*, (University Park, Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1997), 345-468.

⁵On the lyceum movement see Carl Bode, *The American Lyceum; Town Meeting of the Mind*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1956); David Mead, *Yankee Eloquence in the Middle West; The Ohio Lyceum, 1850-1870*, (East Lansing: Michigan State College Press, 1951); Thomas Bender, *Intellect and Public Life: Essays on the Social History of Academic Intellectuals in the United States*, (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993), 3-46; Richard Bushman has also pointed out that education during this time also became a mark or "respectability." Richard Bushman, *The Refinement of America; Persons, Houses, Cities*, (New York: Vintage Books, 1993), 280-287.

⁶Lawrence W. Levine, *Highbrow/Lowbrow; The Emergence of a Cultural Hierarchy in America*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988).

the great showman, Phinias T. Barnum, thought education and profit could go hand-in-hand. The antebellum era saw the growth of the "dime-museum" whose managers presented the public with curiosities designed to amuse and entertain as well as instruct. It saw the growth of panoramas, dioramas, and cosmoramas, where urban Americans could go to view scenes from around the world and learn about foreign lands. And antebellum America saw a growing market for newspapers, magazines, and books, which sought to tap into an expanding demand for enlightened educational amusements. These mass media would spread knowledge to an ever expanding public. They represented democratic progress, since even the most humble mechanic could better himself and his family through intelligent amusements.

But one problem arose which would have profound effects on Kane's and Fox's lives. The culture of curiosity existed side-by-side with a growing sensationalism in the commercial media. This sensationalism was capable of undermining intellectual progress. When scientists and scholars took advantage of the thirst for intellectual amusement to educate an expanding audience, they became performers, judged by how well they drew in a crowd. There was the potential that mere amusement and sensation might take over to the detriment of useful knowledge. That the best performers were not always the most intellectually worthwhile scholars is aptly illustrated by the careers of Margaret Fox and Elisha Kane, who both used the model of scientific inquiry to draw in large audiences.⁷

* * *

The geographic explorations of men like Elisha Kane were particularly successful at combining education with sensation and republican ideology with mass culture. Explorers filled in the great blank spaces on the map and had daring adventures as they did so. They

⁷The best work to deal with these themes and the one which most influences my approach is Neil Harris, *Humbug: The Art of P.T. Barnum*, (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1973); see also Andrea Stulman Dennett, *Weird and Wonderful: The Dime Museum in America*, New York: New York University Press, 1997); The theme of the intellectual as performer in antebellum America is addresses in Bender, *Intellect and Public Life*, 3-46.

represented what a free and virtuous citizenry could accomplish. Narratives of travel to unknown portions of the world symbolized the progress of human knowledge and American ideals at the same time that they thrilled the audience back home. They provided the basis for countless books, magazine articles, panoramas, lectures, and dime-museum exhibits. The men who traveled the world became heroes in the public imagination imbued with tremendous cultural authority and commercial potential.⁸

Investigations into the mind also thrilled the public as they sought answers to important questions, but they bestowed far less cultural authority upon their practitioners, especially when they were women, as they usually were in Spiritualism.⁹ Margaret Fox's spirit-rapping emerged out of a variety of theories concerning the nature of the human mind. Experiments in mesmerism, clairvoyance, phrenology, and finally spiritualism were conducted as public demonstrations throughout the antebellum era. Investigators then, as now, wanted to determine the relationship between the mind and the body. Could the mind travel beyond the confines of the body? Did the shape of the head reflect the capabilities of the mind within? Did the mind survive the death of the body? Countless lecturers traveled the country to demonstrate their theories about such matters to ordinary people who went to see the show and be part of the investigation. In doing so advocates argued that knowledge was being set free from the shackles of religious authority and dogma. Every citizen of the Republic, they argued, could be part of this great discovery of the unknown.¹⁰

⁸A good example is John Charles Fremont who capitalized on his career as an explorer to enter national politics as the Republican party's first presidential candidate. Allan Nevins, *Fremont: Pathmarker of the West*, (New York: D. Appleton-Century Company, 1939).

⁹Ann Braude, *Radical Spirits: Spiritualism and Women's Rights in Nineteenth-Century America*, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1989). Braude has made a convincing argument that spiritualism was empowering for many of the women who became mediums, but I will be emphasizing some serious limitations still faced by women like Fox who found themselves living very public lives.

¹⁰R. Lawrence Moore, *In Search of White Crows: Spiritualism, Parapsychology, and American Culture*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977); Alison Winter, *Mesmerized: Powers of Mind in Victorian Britain*, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1998); Bret E. Carroll, *Spiritualism in Antebellum America*, (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1997).

These investigations of the mind were far more controversial than the geographic investigations of explorers, but they were just as popular. They pointed, in their own way, to democratic American progress, but they also showed that faith in progress could be a source of conflict. The direction of progress was not always clear. Supporters saw spiritual investigations as leading toward a new stage of understanding of humanity's place in the world, but at the same time, detractors feared that fraud and delusion tainted the findings of such investigations. Spirit-rapping never attained the stamp of authentic experience enjoyed by geographic exploration. Instead it inspired debate which raged in public forums over the quality of the knowledge produced in public investigations. Ordinary citizens got involved in these debates which often went on in lecture halls or the columns of city newspapers.¹¹

Thus the story of Elisha Kane and Margaret Fox is not just about public curiosity. It is also about establishing public authority. The greatest difference between the spirit-rapper and the explorer was that Kane achieved a level of cultural authority in America that Fox could never achieve. Part of Kane's authority came from his family background and his gender. wealthy men were supposed to teach the nation, while poor women were not, but his authority also came from the way he manipulated the culture of curiosity to his advantage by emphasizing certain values antebellum Americans held dear. He successfully turned himself into a symbol of American moral and scientific progress. Fox, however, appealed to antebellum curiosity in a way which emphasized conflict. Even though her spirit-rapping represented progress to some, to others it was a mark of moral and intellectual decline.

¹¹Nor was this growing popular culture available to all Americans. It was strongest among both men and women of the northern white middle-class, but cannot be limited to that class. It also encompassed the free northern urban working class and urban populations in the South. Slaves and Indians were generally not a part of the culture of curiosity, nor was it particularly strong in the rural South.

Figure 1



(Top) Margaret Fox from *The Love-Life of Dr. Kane*.
(Bottom) Elisha Kane from Samuel Schmucker, *Life of Dr. Elisha Kent Kane*.

Kane's and Fox's personal relationship serves to emphasize even further this difference in cultural authority, for even though Kane recognized that he and Fox were both attractions who appealed to public curiosity in similar ways, very few others did. Because of their unequal status, their relationship remained secret; he could not bring himself to publicly acknowledge a love-affair with a spirit-rapper. Perhaps he realized that if he became publicly associated with Margaret Fox, his own public authority would be jeopardized. Moreover, their personal relationship demonstrates how much easier it was for a man to negotiate the culture of curiosity than it was for a woman.

More importantly the personal relationship between Kane and Fox demonstrates how close the milieu of intellectual amusement was to pure sensationalism. When antebellum Americans mixed information with sensation, they transformed those who disseminated information into performers. Because of this, there was always the danger that sensation could overpower education. This was particularly true when audiences became interested in the private lives of public people. This was what happened to Fox and Kane when the attention they attracted spilled over into their private lives. By 1855 most Americans had heard of the spirit-rapper, Margaret Fox, and the explorer, Elisha Kane, but it may have come as something of a surprise when newspapers began to report rumors that the two were engaged to be married. When these announcements were followed by a series of retractions and denials concerning this alleged engagement, public interest was aroused.

Such interest was driven by curiosity, but unlike curiosity into geography or even spiritualism, it did not conform to prevailing notions of progress and genteel education. Many watched in horror as public curiosity began to focus its attentions on this matter of a purely private and sensational nature. One well-known New York editor recoiled at the "impertinent curiosity" being indulged in the city newspapers when they speculated about the true nature of Fox and Kane's relationship.¹² The mere sensationalism of celebrity

¹²*New York Tribune*, November 6, 1855.

gossip took over, and eventually a little book was published called *The Love-Life of Dr. Kane*, which claimed to provide insight into the romantic life of the popular explorer.¹³

Kane and Fox had made careers out of combining investigation into the unknown with sensation, but the sensation came to surround their personal lives. The story of how this happened is not just a personal story. It reflects upon the very nature of change in antebellum American mass culture. The culture of curiosity may have had its roots in republican ideology and beliefs about progress and education, but it quickly moved beyond those beginnings to become a part of a commercial mass culture which heralded celebrity and sensation as ardently as it did useful knowledge. The love for investigation and debate spilled over into the purely sensational, especially when a potential scandal was involved. It was not mere chance which allowed this to happen. Popular commercial culture had its own rules which did not always conform to ideologies of progress or the standards of scholarship.¹⁴

* * *

Progress, education, and sensation were tendencies within the world of antebellum popular culture which sometimes conflicted and sometimes supported each another. They were all part of the culture of curiosity, and they would all play a part in both the public and the private lives of Margaret Fox and Elisha Kane. Kane and Fox negotiated that world as individuals. They faced its complexities and contradictions and had to accept the consequences. What follows is the story of two individuals whose lives became intricately mixed up in antebellum popular culture in a variety of ways. Fittingly, it is a personal

¹³On the emergence of a "culture of celebrity" see, Thomas N. Baker, *Sentiment & Celebrity: Nathaniel Parker Willis and the Trials of Literary Fame*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999).

¹⁴On the growth of interest in the sensational in the popular media see two recent treatments of murder in antebellum America; Karen Halttunen, *Murder Most Foul: The Killer and the American Gothic Imagination*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998); and, Patricia Cline Cohen, *The Murder of Helen Jewett: The Life and Death of a Prostitute in Nineteenth-Century New York*, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1998), 19-33; and John D. Stevens, *Sensationalism and the New York Press*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991).

narrative as well as an analysis of antebellum culture. By considering the public and the private in tandem we can see the story in its rich complexity.¹⁵

Elisha Kane and Margaret Fox often used American curiosity to their advantage, but it could overwhelm them as well. Kane hungered for public recognition, but he also recoiled from the public gaze. He tried his best to reconcile the scientific motives behind his geographic explorations with his ambition and the need to interest the public in his efforts.

Fox, too, longed for the money, the independence, and the social advancement a lifestyle in the public eye could bring her. But public curiosity could bring derision as well, especially for a young woman. Eventually she would attempt to escape from her public life to take refuge in a traditional women's role as wife to Elisha Kane. In this she failed, due largely to the cultural factors which worked against a woman in public life. Margaret Fox's private affairs demonstrate both the possibilities and the risks faced by a woman attempting to live a public life in antebellum America.

Popular culture brought together many disparate elements of American society, but it did not obscure the serious social divisions which remained. While in many ways popular curiosity was a leveling force in American society, when it came to these individual lives, public scrutiny magnified social divisions.¹⁶ Mass culture made Elisha Kane into a great scientific hero who was honored by his entire nation. It raised Margaret Fox up for a time, but eventually it left her in poverty, largely forgotten by those who once found her intriguing.

¹⁵For a defense of the narrative approach to history and an overview of recent work in narrative history see James Goodman, "For the Love of Stories," *Reviews in American History*, 26(1), (1998), 255-274.

¹⁶The idea of popular culture as a unifying force in American history is treated by Jim Cullen, *The Art of Democracy: A Concise History of Popular Culture in the United States*, (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1996).

CHAPTER ONE

THE NEW WORLD ENCOUNTERS THE OLD: ELISHA KENT KANE'S EARLY WORLD TRAVELS

In the Spring of 1844, a young gentleman from Philadelphia stood at the top of the Taal volcano in the Philippines looking down into the crater below. As his Filipino guides and his Prussian traveling companion secured the rope, he prepared to descend to the crater floor. The young man was Dr. Elisha Kent Kane, currently on leave from his post as physician to the United States Diplomatic Embassy to China. Dr. Kane was one of the more widely traveled Americans of the nineteenth century. In his short lifetime he set foot on four continents. He walked the streets of Rio de Janeiro, Bombay, Macao, Manila, Cairo, Athens and London before he reached the age of thirty. Before he turned thirty-five, he had extended his travels to the coast of Africa, the battlefields of Mexico, and the frozen seas within the Arctic Circle. Many of the places he traveled to had been visited by hundreds of American merchants and seamen before him, but on this spring day in 1844 Kane was going somewhere that no American had ever been before. It would not be the last time that he would go to such a place.

Kane's descent into the crater of the Taal volcano was the act of a restless and ambitious young man, full of boundless energy, daring, and a driving curiosity about the world. His friend Fletcher Webster, a fellow member of the Cushing Embassy to China, recounted that when he met Kane the previous November on board the *USS Brandywine* in Bombay he "was at once struck by the activity and energy of the doctor, who was never for a moment idle, or seemed enervated by the climate." Webster went on to observe: "He was very fond of the exact sciences, and was an indefatigable student, - evidently annoyed when not engaged in something, and always restless unless busy, - for hours in the state-

room buried in mathematics, and then next seen at the mast-head or over the vessel's side."¹

The restless curiosity that drove Kane to climb up masts and down into craters led him around the globe. It also made him into a celebrity in his homeland. Within a dozen years of his descent into the Taal crater, after his travels had taken him even further afield, the name of Elisha Kent Kane would be known to any American who was paying attention. He was heralded as a great hero and held up as a moral example for American youth. When he died tragically in the prime of his life, Americans from New Orleans to Boston mourned his passing. The story of the travels that took Kane to the brink of a volcanic crater on the opposite side of the globe from his Philadelphia home is not simply the story of a single traveler; it is also the story of a nation of people for whom travel was a means to fame and honor.

* * *

Elisha Kent Kane was the eldest son of John Kintzing Kane and Jane Leiper Kane of Philadelphia. When he was born in early 1820, his father was working hard to establish a successful law practice. John and Jane Kane stood near the top of the new professional middle-class of the young republic's growing urban centers. When Elisha was eight years old, his father supported Andrew Jackson for president, and after Jackson's victory, he received lucrative political appointments. This culminated in his appointment as a Federal Judge in the United States district court for the eastern district of Pennsylvania in 1845.

Elisha Kane's father also had an amateur's interest in science. Like many men of standing he found that cultivating that interest was a good way to involve himself in the community. In 1825 he was elected to membership in the American Philosophical Society. He served as the society's Secretary for twenty years before becoming its vice-president in 1849 and, finally, its president from 1857 to his death the following year.² John Kane was

¹Fletcher Webster, quoted in William Elder, *Biography of Elisha Kent Kane*, (Philadelphia: Childs and Peterson, 1858), 75-76.

²*Dictionary of American Biography*, "John Kintzing Kane," 257-258; Elder,

thus in a position to know some of the most influential men of his time in both intellectual and political circles. This would come as no small advantage to his oldest son.

Elisha was born in February 1820 and was baptized as a Presbyterian. His upbringing was firmly upper-middle class. He attended private schools, was taught by private tutors, and was given the opportunity to study and prepare for any profession he desired. The family was not inordinately wealthy; Elisha would certainly have to work for a living, but it was expected that he would grow up to work in one of the respectable and lucrative professions.

According to William Elder, a friend of the Kane family and Elisha's biographer, as a child he was hard to control. He avoided school work, but had an intelligent, if undisciplined, mind that preferred independent investigation.³ From Elder's account, one can imagine him as the sort of child who would today be called hyperactive. Elisha attended the University of Virginia, where he began to prepare himself for a career as a civil engineer. There he was most interested in his studies in chemistry and geology. Small in stature, he was attracted to activities which combined physical and intellectual efforts, allowing him to satisfy his restless nature. One such activity was taking geological field trips into the Blue Ridge Mountains with the noted geology professor William Rogers.⁴

Plans for a career as a civil engineer quickly changed, however, when, at the age of eighteen, while still in his first year at the university, Kane became seriously ill with rheumatic fever. His symptoms included severe swelling of the joints, and, more startling, a swelling of the lining and valves of the heart. For weeks he was expected to die, but slowly he recovered. The effects of this serious illness would stay with him for the rest of his life, manifesting themselves in periods of severe illness, and would ultimately contribute to his early death.⁵

13-17.

³Elder, *Biography*, 18-31.

⁴Elder, *Biography*, 32-33; George Washington Corner, *Doctor Kane of the Arctic Seas*, (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1972), 23-24.

⁵Elder, *Biography*, 36-38; Corner, *Doctor Kane*, 24-25. Kane's two

Kane's illness led to a change in career plans. Instead of geology and engineering, he would now study medicine. Elder asserts that this choice was made because the chronically ill Kane and his friends felt "that he would be happier, or less unhappy, if he understood and could manage his own case."⁶ Kane began to study medicine with a doctor in Philadelphia and enrolled as a medical student at the University of Pennsylvania. By the end of 1840, before he even graduated, twenty-year-old Kane was serving as a resident physician at Blockley Hospital.

When Kane was finishing his medical studies, John Kane, apparently without his son's knowledge, pulled some political strings to get Elisha appointed as an assistant surgeon in the United States Navy.⁷ As a surgeon on a navy ship, Kane could have a steady career, much easier and financially more stable than a private practice. His father hoped that ship-board life would restore his son's health as well as provide him with a steady income. In addition to being the best thing for his physical well being, a position as a navy surgeon would enable Kane to pursue interests in geology and natural history that he had developed while at the University of Virginia.

Although connections got him this job, Kane did not lack qualifications for this position. While a medical education in the 1840s was not as rigorous as it is today, Kane had done well in school. His thesis had been so well received by the faculty that it was published on their recommendation, which was not usual. His time in residence at Blockley Hospital in Philadelphia had also been successful, and he was well thought of by his more experienced medical colleagues.⁸

The position of surgeon on board a naval ship was not at all unusual for someone like Kane with medical knowledge and an interest in science. It was the launching point of

biographers, William Elder and George Corner were both medical doctors. Corner, as a modern physician, probably makes the best judgments about Kane's health.

⁶Elder, *Biography*, 40.

⁷Elder, *Biography*, 53.

⁸Corner, *Doctor Kane*, 26-28.

many scientific careers, including those of two of Britain's most accomplished men in the biological sciences, Joseph Hooker and Thomas Huxley. Hooker served as assistant surgeon/botanist on *H.M.S. Erebus* on Sir James Ross' voyage of discovery in the Antarctic from 1839 to 1843, and Huxley served as surgeon on board the British survey ship *Rattlesnake*.⁹ Growing sciences such as geology, botany, zoology, hydrography, ethnology and the study of terrestrial magnetism all required travel as a means of doing research, so for those without the resources to pay their own way, the navy offered a good alternative.¹⁰

Kane was probably thinking along these lines when he followed his father's advice to enter the Navy. He passed the examination to become an assistant surgeon, but as the Navy had no openings at the time, he had to wait before receiving a commission. In the meantime an opportunity just as good, if not better, came along. He sought and received a place on Caleb Cushing's diplomatic mission to China aboard the Navy frigate *Brandywine*, commanded by Commodore Foxhall A. Parker. In May, 1843 Dr. Kane (as yet without a Naval commission) was aboard the *Brandywine* as physician to the delegation when it departed Norfolk for China.¹¹

The Cushing Embassy was part of the United States' growing involvement with world markets and world diplomacy. China's distrust of foreigners had traditionally made commerce between the United States and China a delicate affair, yet commerce persisted nonetheless, until interrupted by the "Opium War" between China and Great Britain in 1840. In August, 1842 this war was resolved with the Treaty of Nanking, in which China

⁹Peter Raby, *Bright Paradise, Victorian Scientific Travelers*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), 28-41.

¹⁰Hooker and Huxley were both representatives of a new professional class of British scientist who, unlike Sir Joseph Banks or Charles Darwin of a previous generation, did not have the independent wealth necessary to travel as "gentlemen" on board navy ships.

¹¹Corner, 32-33. Corner gives an excellent account of where Kane went during his travels and when he went there based on research in the Elisha Kent Kane Papers at the American Philosophical Society Library, but he did not use certain important accounts in Kane's own words about his travels.

succumbed to most of the British demands by opening five ports to British trade and ceded Hong Kong to Britain.¹²

These new conditions affected American trading interests. Through the efforts of Commodore Lawrence Kearny, China announced that the new trade regulations would apply to other Christian countries as well as Britain. This in effect opened China to trade with America, but a number of American diplomats thought that these trade rights should be secured by an independent Sino-American treaty. As a result, veteran diplomat Caleb Cushing was dispatched to China in the spring of 1843.¹³

What mattered more than diplomacy to Kane was the opportunity the mission offered to see the world and pursue his various interests. It was an opportunity he would exploit to the fullest. Despite persistent periods of ill health, he was a young man of tremendous energy and unbridled curiosity, even if he lacked discipline. He was only five and a half feet tall and generally weighed no more than 130 pounds, but he made up for his small size with a strong desire for knowledge. He read as much as he could on a variety of subjects from world history to natural history, hoping to supplement his book learning with first-hand experience during the voyage. He specialized in no single field of learning; instead he was curious about everything from ancient religion to geology.

In May, 1843 the *Brandywine* crossed the Atlantic to the Portuguese Island of Madeira, about 400 miles west of the coast of North Africa, where Dr. Kane did not have the opportunity to get off the ship. It then recrossed the Atlantic to the Brazilian port of Rio de Janeiro. There he found himself on what he called at the time "my first and only foreign soil."¹⁴

* * *

¹²Claude M. Fuess, *The Life of Caleb Cushing*, (New York: Harcourt Brace and Company, 1923, 397-454.

¹³Ibid., 397-454.

¹⁴EKK, "Rio de Janeiro," EKK Papers.

Kane kept journals of all of his travels, but many of these accounts are now lost. Fortunately, a four-page account of his visit to Rio does survive. It may have been written as a journal entry, a letter to his family, or perhaps for possible publication in a newspaper or magazine at home. Kane's attitude in this account was that of a searcher after novelty. He commented that "The general appearance of Rio was such as to greatly interest me; not so much by its intrinsic merit as by the constantly recurring conviction which it everywhere brought - of another people and another world."¹⁵

The two themes of an exotic landscape and exotic people characterized much of Kane's writing. His account begins with a literary panorama of the local scenery. "The general character of the scenery was wild and highly picturesque, the mountain ridges having an air of rugged grandeur which contrasted admirably with the placid character of its quiet waters." Then, with a strange mixture of curiosity and xenophobic horror, it moves from a description of the wondrous landscape into a description of its strange inhabitants.

He described "uncivilized looking mulattos" who, he later found with surprise, "to be the native and loyal citizens." In true Jacksonian democratic style he dwelt on the social and economic extremes of this Brazilian city. With more contempt than sympathy, he commented on the conditions of the poor in Rio, whom he called "a wretched herd of jabbering negroes," and contrasted them with what he saw as the aristocratic pretenses of the Imperial Court of the fifteen-year-old Emperor, Dom Pedro II, who according to Kane "needed more than his gilded coat to make him manlike." Kane's description of Rio is an argument for American republican principles. The city is described as a land where abject poverty existed alongside ostentatious wealth. "Nothing can be more pitiably contrasted, than the gilded finery, and squalid rags, so curiously intermingled."¹⁶ In this, his earliest writing on foreign places, Kane's descriptions of foreign lands reflected back upon

¹⁵Ibid.

¹⁶Ibid.

conditions at home. America, to Kane, was a different kind of nation where such disparities of wealth did not exist.

The *Brandywine* progressed from Rio, rounded the Cape of Good Hope, and arrived in Bombay, India on October 25. Here the ship had to wait three weeks for the arrival of the expedition's leader, Caleb Cushing, who was traveling by way of Suez. While waiting in Bombay, Kane took the opportunity to travel through the exotic Indian country-side. He visited the temple caves of Elephanta Island near Bombay as well as those at Ellora and Daulatabad. Buddhist and Hindu temples are here excavated into the rock. He also traveled inland across the Ghat Mountains at Khandala to visit the Karla caves with a young midshipman from the *Brandywine*, William Weaver.¹⁷ Later, after Cushing joined the ship, the embassy proceeded on to the island of Ceylon (Sri Lanka) where, in early December, Kane traveled inland to its capital, Kandy, and hunted elephants in the countryside.¹⁸ Rev. George Jones, the chaplain to the embassy, later described Kane at this point in his life. "He seemed to be all hope, all ardor, and his eye appeared already to take in the whole world as his own.... His conversation showed a great deal of such intelligence as is gained from books, and a great desire to learn all topics."¹⁹

These travels in India certainly thrilled the young doctor. William Elder colorfully asserts that Kane "used to refer to this as a time of delightful excitement. The risk edged the relish of the joyance, and he feasted to the full upon the tropical wealth of novelty which everywhere surrounded him, multiplied in its effect by its infinite variety." Clearly

¹⁷While we have no account by Kane of these journeys, Midshipman William Weaver wrote about the journey as an exercise for his writing tutor. "Description of a visit to Ceylon and India," William H. Weaver Papers, Margaret Elder Dow Collection, Dartmouth College Library Special Collections.

¹⁸Corner, *Doctor Kane*, 36; Elder, *Biography*, 55-56; Fuess, *Cushing*, 422-425. There is some disagreement as to dates here, Corner says Cushing arrived on November 28, while Elder incorrectly says the *Brandywine* waited for "some months" in Bombay.

¹⁹Rev. George Jones quoted in Elder, *Biography*, 77.

this first opportunity for extensive inland travel in India stimulated Kane's desire to see more of the world.²⁰

With Cushing now on board the *Brandywine*, the delegation resumed its journey to China, reaching Macao Roads in the Bay of Canton by the end of February, 1844. Here the slow process of diplomacy began, but this was handled by Cushing, his assistant, Fletcher Webster, and Dr. Peter Parker, a missionary who had spent many years in China.²¹ Kane had little to do, and day after day of idle ship life must have annoyed his restless spirit. To combat the boredom he sought and obtained permission from Cushing to do some exploring on his own with a Prussian Baron named Diedrick von Loë, whom he had met while traveling near Bombay. The pair traveled south-east across the China Sea to Luzon, the largest of the Philippine Islands, then a colony of Spain. Kane seems to have planned for this journey even before leaving home, since he was prepared with useful letters of introduction to various political and ecclesiastical authorities in the Philippines. During these Philippine travels Kane began to move from the approach of a sight-seeing traveler to that of an explorer.²²

Kane and Loë traveled extensively over the inland regions of Luzon and perhaps other islands of the Philippines. Accounts of the earliest part of these travels survive, in scattered parts, in Kane's papers in what may be either a draft of a book or a much longer and more polished account for his family. We know that John Kane wanted his son to publish an account of his travels, and Elisha's brother, Thomas, often referred to the goal of publishing something, but there is no record of anything ever appearing in print until his later Arctic travels.²³ This suggests that Kane's motive for traveling was not just personal curiosity; he also realized that a few articles or even a book on his exotic travels could bring

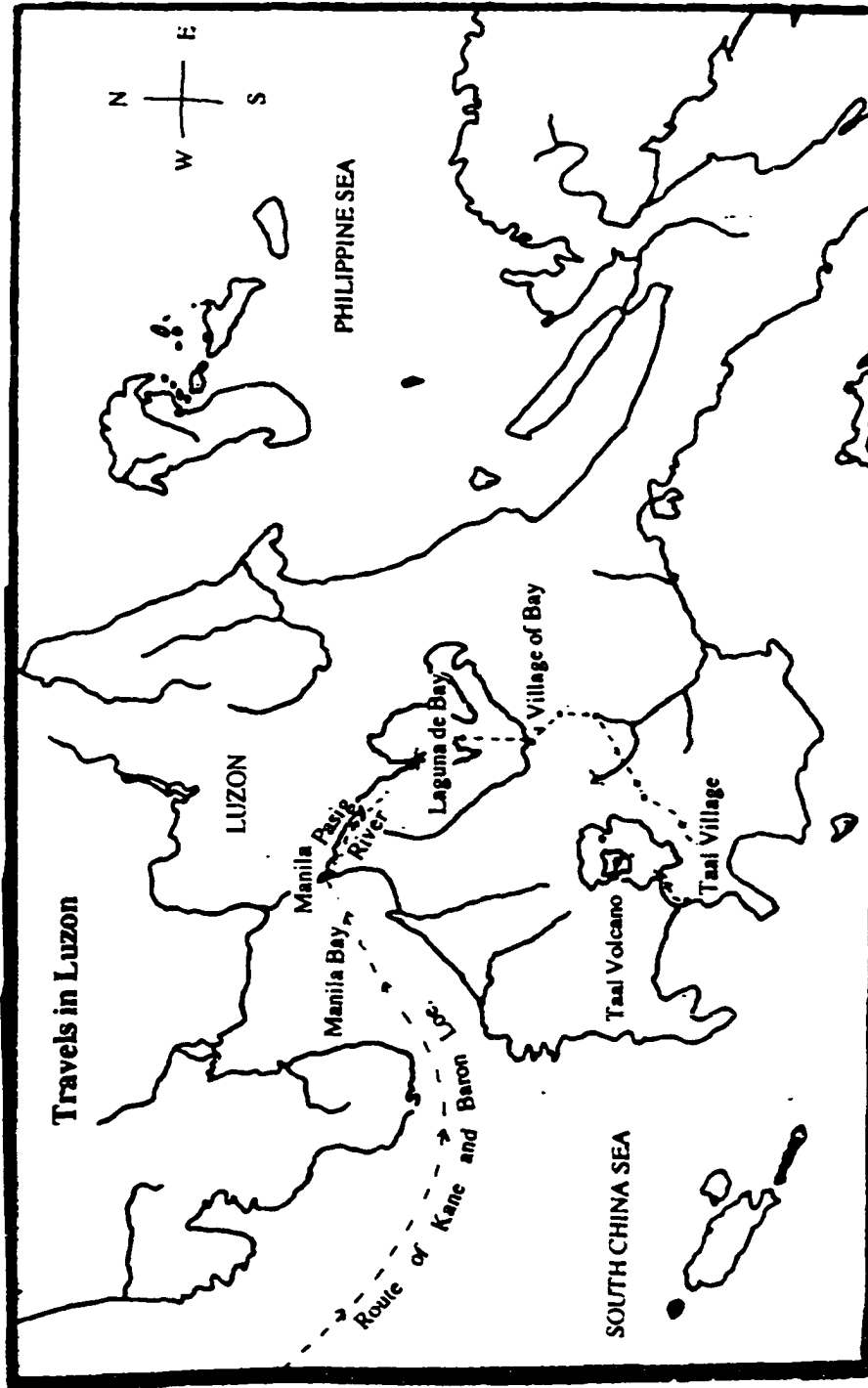
²⁰Elder, *Biography*, 56.

²¹Fuess, *Cushing*, 425-438.

²²Elder, *Biography*, 58; EKK, "Notebooks on Travels...[1844], No.1, EKK Papers.

²³Thomas Kane to EKK, February 12, 1847, January 26, 1851, April 12, 1851, EKK Papers.

Figure 2



Elisha Kane's Travels in the Philippines, 1844.

him the reputation he desired. Whatever the purpose of these narratives, there are nine chapter-length sections of it, all of which bear the marks of later editing.²⁴

Kane's language, describing his arrival in Manila, shows something of his romantic approach to travel, typical of his style at this point.

It was at the close of the monsoon, in the sultry month of May, a season notorious for its listlessness and sleepy calms that we anchored off the great capital of the Philippine Islands. I say we for I had one companion, who like myself was a wanderer and had his own reasons for making the East his field. We had met each other in the Hindu Ghauts near Bombay, he on his way seaward, bound for the Hills of Mahableswher, I on a pilgrimage to the cave temples of Elloza and Carli. Again we met in Canton and Macao, and now by that strange sympathy which sometimes brings opposites together we had yoked forces and friendships to tramp over comparatively untrodden ground.²⁵

Kane presented himself as a romantic adventurer looking for novelty. He had not yet developed the voice of the scientific explorer that would later characterize his popular Arctic books.

Kane's Philippine narrative falls somewhere between an adventure story and ethnography, with surprisingly little comment, considering his later career, on the natural history and geology of the regions he passes through. As he and Baron Loë travel over the countryside, he gives picturesque descriptions, moving from the landscape to the people who inhabit it, all with the goal of helping his reader to develop an accurate visual impression without the use of pictures. Kane expects his readers to be both entertained and informed by his narrative of exotic travel.²⁶

Kane and Loë visited all of the sights in Manila. They went to the cockfights and "as in duty bound lost money at the same." They looked in on the cigar manufacturers and visited the city's architectural sites, but it is clear that they wanted to do more than just see what had been described by earlier travelers. In Rio and in India Kane had traveled in places that were exotic, but still well-known to European and American travelers. Now

²⁴EKK, "Notebooks on Travels...[1844], No. 1,3,4,5,6,8, and one unnumbered; EKK, "Travel Notes..."; EKK, "EKK Items, No. 4, EKK Papers;"

²⁵EKK, "Notebooks on Travels...[1844], No. 1," EKK Papers.

²⁶Ibid.

Kane wanted to branch out, to become an explorer as well as a traveler. Kane and Loë received permission of the authorities to explore inland regions of Luzon where few foreigners were allowed to go.²⁷

The two adventurers traveled up the Pasig River to Laguna de Bay. They began "on one of those beautiful mornings which make you in love with life." floating in a large dug-out canoe called a "banka" propelled by three paddlers and a pilot. As they traveled upstream, Kane observed all the sights, both human and natural, around him and described what he saw in the voice of one sure of his own superiority. He was in good spirits, and his narrative has a light-hearted touch. The two young men were more interested in the people than the flora and fauna. "For a long time we amused ourselves by looking at the native women bathing in the stream." They flirted with the women, trying to get them to smile. Kane commented on the attractiveness of their raven black hair only to be amused and disgusted to see that the women's teeth were stained with the juice of the betel nut.²⁸

From Laguna de Bay they continue their travels on foot into the mountains, sometimes sleeping out and other times staying at the haciendas of Spanish land owners or with the Catholic priests in Tagal villages. Kane finds his surroundings both wondrous and amusing. While at times he ridicules what he sees as the backward habits of the Filipinos, at other times he makes fun of his own sense of being out of place in a strange and different land. The clash with exotic cultures his trip often precipitates is, for Kane, an opportunity for humor.

One evening early in the trip Kane and Loë entered the village of Bay in the middle of the night, but as strangers in a dark village they did not know where to sleep:

Following our guide we noiselessly entered by an unfastened door and found ourselves seemingly in a large apartment. All however was darkness. We could hear distinctly the sounds of breathing sleepers and by carefully groping our way we became conscious of a vacant mat on which we stretched ourselves and fell asleep.

²⁷Ibid..

²⁸EKK, "EKK Items. No. 4," EKK Papers.

Twice had a vague consciousness of oppression disturb my slumbers, but I coveted the gentle blessing too eagerly to awake. Again however and my sleepy perceptions became conscious of a heavy arm upon my neck. More, a something very like a head garnished with long hair was converting my chest into a pillow. There is a point beyond which even good nature cannot go. Remember too that I was very tired and to tell the truth a little (a very little) scared. I seized the unknown head by its dangling locks and started to my feet.

It was not yet broad day, but much too light for my wishes. The head emitted a yell which in an instant brought around me fathers and grandfathers, mothers and grandmothers, aunts, sisters, and cousins of sizes ages and, alas! costumes entirely beyond my pen. One look showed me a large Tagal apartment covered with sleeping mats, and a little distance from me - hairs length - a young native woman. Literally not fair, but poetically much too fair for her position. Surprise was greater on her side than mine was, and as for the family crowd their surprise, strange to say, seemed about to manifest itself by kicking me out of doors. Loë, the phlegmatic Loë, most distressingly slept on.

Luckily for Kane, the village priest was able to sort the matter out, but Kane readily admits that he was the foolish one who did not know local custom, while the occupants of the apartment he had entered "listened most respectfully to the gibberish by which I tried to render simple the complicated presence of two strange and somewhat shabby gentlemen in their dormitory."²⁹ Either way the emphasis is on strangeness and the distance between himself and those of other cultures.

Kane and Loë progressed inland, where they met and enjoyed the hospitality of an old Spaniard, Senor Don Inigo Gonzales y Azaola, who, according to Kane, had seen the volcanoes of Mexico with the famous German traveler, Alexander von Humboldt. While staying at Don Inigo's hacienda they explored the area. They climbed "El Monte de Mah-jai-jai", collected bird skins, and observed the people. Kane described in detail sugar production on Don Inigo's estate, following this up with a description of an alligator hunt, which he finds brutal, and then progressing to a discourse on the roles of the government and the Catholic Church in the Philippines. In short, everything he observed in this far-off land was worthy of detailed description for the instruction and amusement of his readers.³⁰

²⁹Ibid.

³⁰EKK, "Notebooks on Travels...[1844]," No. 3,4, and 5, EKK Papers.

Joined now by Don Inigo, Kane and Loë traveled further inland. Here Kane's feelings of cultural supremacy came forward as he jokingly pointed to the backwardness of Spanish colonial society. First he laughed at Don Inigo's coach which he described as a "cherished piece of antiquity." Next he came upon a "piano made by the verbal direction of our Padre to his Indian parishioners without a working model of a European workman." Of this he said, "My temperament is a most unfortunate one; I nearly offended Don Inigo by laughing at his carriage - I really offended myself by laughing at this Philippine piano. There was a moral as well as a pathos about the old 'spinnet,' but I laughed on." He suggested a measure of moral and aesthetic degeneracy of Spanish colonial civilization exposed too long to the wilderness.³¹

Kane's goal now, with his companions and guides, was the Taal volcano, whose deep two-mile-wide crater is on an island in the middle of a large volcanic lake in the southern part of Luzon. Of all his early travels, it is the trip to the Taal volcano to which biographers have paid the most attention. Here Kane's narrative begins to emphasize the kind of dangers that would come to dominate his later writings, and, for the first time, he combines the elements of science, adventure, the exotic wonders that would give him a popular following later in life.

First he narrated another anecdote of intercultural miscommunication that he found humorous, but tinged with a serious threat of danger. While his companions were having a mid-day siesta at the village of Taal, Kane borrowed a horse from the local priest and went by himself to see the volcanic lake. He was riding along pondering the scenery when, "a large Indian rose suddenly before my horse and almost before I had recovered from the sudden start of the animal, he had seized him by the bridle. The man was armed by a long knife and although his language was a perfect jargon I knew enough by intonation and

³¹EKK, "Notebooks on Travels...[1844]," No. 6, EKK Papers.

gestures that he was ordering me to dismount.” Kane immediately drew his pistol and spurred his horse, knocking the man down, and galloped away down the path.³²

He visited the Lake of Taal as planned, but eventually he had to return to the village along the same route. At the place of his earlier encounter, a large group of islanders waited for him. A chase ensued. Kane galloped away, then wheeled his horse around and galloped back through the surprised group, throwing rocks at his attackers. Soon it seemed as if he would be brought down by this mob, which, he believed, wanted to murder him as a Protestant heretic. “Some time has thus gone by and the infernal devils still preserved their ground, when I saw a second party well mounted and rapidly nearing me from the other direction. The party behind gave a loud shout of exultation - and pressed on - for myself I was in that stupid state of confusion which attends the complete absence of an [illegible] when I recognized the white cassocks and broad brimmed hats of the *Padrés*. A moment more and I was hugged, kissed, and congratulated by a regular posse of Augustines headed by Padre Poblacion, Loë, and Don Inigo.”³³

After this dramatic rescue by a friendly ecclesiastical cavalry, Kane explains that the adventure was actually more ludicrous than it seemed. While he had imagined that the “Indians” were out to slaughter him as a heretic, in actuality the man who had stopped Kane’s horse, named Esedro, had been acting quite reasonably. Esedro had recognized the priest’s favorite horse being ridden by Kane, who was unknown to him. He saw Kane as “a very shabby suspicious looking, not foreigner, but Spaniard, a sort of vice sub-delagado hanger on of the tobacco inspection or some such respectable personage. In a word, I was not a persecuted heretic, but a run-away horse thief.”³⁴

One of the more appealing aspects of Kane’s writings is the way in which, in the midst of a largely ethnocentric narrative that cast himself as the superior white man surrounded by foreigners, he can suddenly turn the tables on his reader to show himself as

³²EKK, “Notebooks of Travels...[1844],” No. 8, EKK Papers.

³³Ibid.

³⁴Ibid.

the foreigner. Yet these moments of insight never last long, and he soon returns to the role of superior "great white hunter." The technique ultimately serves to further distance himself and his readers from the inhabitants of foreign lands.

Imagined danger soon turned to real danger, as Kane and his companions set off to visit the volcano. They hired an extra large banka which took them, with a host of servants, including Esedro, now Kane's friend, to Taal Lake. Kane described it as unlike any lake he had ever seen. "The saline character of its waters gave it a darker tinge, but it was not on this account called by the natives 'the dark sea,' for the quantities of crumbled cinder and charred detritus which cover its bottom and line its shores are such as to make it literally black."³⁵

They sailed out into this "zone of desolation in the midst of fruitfulness," making their way to the Island of Bonbong, which he describes as "a mass of scoriacious ejections rising into a central cone, covered in some places by long runs of congealed lava and at others rent into angular gullies just as you would expect in any good orthodox volcano." No living thing could be seen in this landscape: the ground was littered with cinder, and from the crater "a lazy column of steam and smoke was slowly ascending."³⁶

Kane and Loë, accompanied by Esedro and a few other local boatmen, explored this barren landscape. At one point Kane's hat (a sombrero he had picked up in Rio) was blown off his head into the lake. On trying to retrieve it from the shallow water near shore he broke through the crust beneath him and plunged up to his neck in the water.

The rebutting current had carried me some distance from the shore and I swam in but slowly. Happening to turn my eyes toward our group,, I observed the Tagala boatmen violently gesticulating to me to splash, pointing in most uncomfortable pantomime to their teeth, while the face of my friend the Baron was fixed upon me with a horrified expression that almost froze me. It seemed an age before I reached this doubtful terra firma and you may imagine my feelings when upon receiving the congratulations of my little party I saw the fin of a large shark rippling the surface of the water within a stone's throw of us.³⁷

³⁵EKK, "Notebooks of Travels...[1844]," unnumbered, EKK Papers.

³⁶Ibid.

³⁷Ibid.

The party slept on the island that night, and in the morning they began to climb the volcano, finally arriving at the top where they could look into the crater. "Crawling upon our hands and knees, the lava within six inches of our noses, suddenly our heads jutted up above the crest of the volcano, and the magnificence of the crater literally a coup d'oeil burst upon us." What lay below them was a crater around two miles in diameter filled with "spires of lava" and lakes of "congealed black mud." At its center another cone rose 150 feet, "and in its centre a boiling cauldron of fire, smoke, steam, and sulphur." He admits that the sublimity of the scene was beyond his powers of description. As Kane and Loë lay there looking down into this volcanic scene, they formed a plan to descend into it.³⁸

The pair did not proceed right away. This section of the narrative ends with their first glimpse into the crater and resumes at some later date, with Kane and Loë returning to the island with a large group of islanders prepared for a journey into the crater. They again climbed the volcano and chose a place for their descent. Kane's account makes no mention of this, but at some point, most likely at the insistence of the Baron or Don Inigo, he wrote a short note in pencil which still survives among his papers, absolving his friends of all responsibility for his dangerous actions.³⁹ Having nothing to secure their climbing rope to, they dug eight holes in the slope of the mountain, "and into each we deposited a pair of Indians who seated with their legs braced against the sides took charge of the rope upon which we hung our safety."⁴⁰

After the Baron threatened to shoot in the head any of the Tagala rope holders who did not attend to their duty, Kane, who, at no more than 130 pounds, weighed much less than his six-foot-four-inch companion, started down the 103-foot descent. After climbing and being lowered part way, Kane looked up to see Loë at a projecting crag fourteen feet from the top. They both agreed that it would not be a good idea for the large Prussian to trust himself to the rope, so the Baron turned back. Elder asserts that, at this point, Baron

³⁸Ibid.

³⁹EKK to Kane family, April 14, 1844, EKK Papers.

⁴⁰EKK, "Travel Notes - The Crater" EKK Papers.

Loë urged Kane to give up the descent, but Kane makes no mention of this in his narrative. Instead we learn from Kane that Esedro took the Baron's place. Elder's account, quite typically of nineteenth century accounts of white men traveling among "Indians," makes no mention of Esedro. All later accounts incorrectly describe this as a solo adventure.⁴¹

Kane's narrative ends with him and Esedro exploring the crater. He relates a local myth Esedro tells him about the crater, then the account abruptly ends. Elder, the only other source for these travels, asserts that once Kane reached the crater floor he untied himself from the rope, collected some specimens from the crater's lake for later scientific analysis, and barely made it back to the rope in time to tie it back around himself before almost losing consciousness from the fumes. He was then hauled out of the crater and carried home. Elder adds the rather dubious story that a "pygmy mob" then assailed Kane and his friends for desecrating the gods of the volcano, so that they had to hide in the bushes, firing off their guns until rescued by the local padres.⁴²

We know no more of Kane's travels in the Philippines except for a brief account in a 1859 book on "eminent Philadelphians," which suggests that the travels extended further on Luzon and on to the Philippine islands of Camarinas and Mindoro.⁴³ By the end of June, Kane was back in Macao to participate in the more social aspects of the final month of the diplomatic expedition, but when the *Brandywine* left Macao in August, its mission over, Dr. Kane was not on board. He had resigned his post with the intention of setting up a medical practice in the Chinese port of Whampoa farther up the Canton River. Here he and his partner, an Englishman named Michael O'Sullivan, planned to tend to the medical needs of the crews of European and American ships visiting that part of China. This

⁴¹Elder, *Biography*, 63-65; EKK, "Travel Notes - The Crater," EKK Papers. Describing non-western people as "Indians" far from either North America or India was common in the nineteenth century.

⁴²Elder, *Biography*, 64-65.

⁴³"Elisha Kent Kane," in Henry Simpson, *Lives of Eminent Philadelphians Now Deceased, Collected from Original and Authentic Sources*, (Philadelphia: Brotherhead, 1859), 618-620.

endeavor lasted only a few months. Late in the year Kane became seriously ill with rice fever, and in January, 1845 he left Whampoa.⁴⁴

* * *

From January to April, 1845 Kane's route is unclear. He may have spent some time exploring more of the interior of India. Some accounts describe him traveling through the Himalayas, but by April he was in Cairo, Egypt planning an ascent of the Nile. A diary of his trip up the Nile can be found among his papers, yet it is a much less polished piece of writing than his accounts of Rio and the Philippines. Far from the enthusiastic young explorer of the earlier accounts, this diary shows a tired and depressed man, whose travels had perhaps gone on too long.⁴⁵

On April 14 he took leave of some former traveling companions and boarded a boat he had hired to take him up the Nile. This "felucca" was twenty-two feet long by ten feet wide and manned by six men, a pilot, and Kane's personal "dragoman," Hassan. Boats of this type can still be found floating north with the current down the Nile, then catching the prevailing northerly winds to sail back upstream, as they have for hundreds of years.

Kane wrote of the men who accompany him on his "solitary travel on the Nile" as one would a team of horses.

Some discrimination is necessary in selecting these worthies. It is rather an advantage to have them of the dare devil order. A mutiny, if you manage them properly, need never be expected, and the tough tow horse labours which I have to expect are best met by that class of men. They are selected for various accomplishments and paid accordingly. One is a Sennar negro used to the dialects, another a Nubian, used to desert travel, two others are hide-bound animals who can carry in a noon day sun the full material for a temporary march and all are admirably gifted with the admirable foraging faculty which nicely discriminates as to fresh eggs and young chickens at the cheapest marketable or unmarketable rates.⁴⁶

The group embarked on the morning of the 15th. Kane's interests in Egypt focused on ancient Egyptology rather than the Egypt of his own time or even the natural sciences.

⁴⁴Elder, *Biography*, 65-74; Corner, *Doctor Kane*, 40-41.

⁴⁵Corner, *Doctor Kane*, 43-44; EKK, EKK Items No. 7, "Journal of a trip in Egypt," EKK Papers.

⁴⁶EKK, EKK Items No. 7, "Journal of a trip in Egypt," EKK Papers.

He comments on various ancient sites and upon the recent discoveries by European scholars such as Sir John Gardner Wilkinson, who had recently published a book on Ancient Egypt.⁴⁷

This was the golden age of European Egyptology. Since Napoleon's armies had descended upon Egypt with a corps of scholars at the turn of the century, European scholars and tourists had been visiting Egypt to view, and often take home with them, its great wonders. In the 1820s Jean Francois Champollion had finally deciphered Egyptian hieroglyphs, paving the way for a greater understanding of ancient Egypt. Historian Brian Fagan has observed that, by the 1830s, Egypt had become a European fad, leading to what he calls "the rape of the Nile." "Diplomats and tourists, merchants and dukes, all vied with one another to assemble spectacular collections of mummies and other antiquities."⁴⁸

Kane threw himself whole-heartedly into this scholarly milieu. He read widely in preparation for his voyage and then searched out ruins mentioned by these authors. Kane seemed to see himself as something of an amateur Egyptologist. He hunted for ruins, sketched the landscape, and copied hieroglyphs into his notebook. While "ruin hunting" near El Sheikh Sa'id he stumbled upon "the trunk of a king in fine marble, or alabaster. The cartouches on his girdle made him a Pharaoh." Feeling that his discovery was of some scholarly significance, he arranged to have the piece of statue packed up and shipped to the American Philosophical Society in Philadelphia.⁴⁹

Kane next visited the crocodile mummy pits near Manfalût. He hoped to surpass previous visitors by going deeper into these tombs than any before him. Here he found mummies of humans, dogs, cats and crocodiles. On his way back he took the time to describe some interesting geological phenomena in his journal.⁵⁰ By April 25 he was in

⁴⁷Ibid.

⁴⁸Brian Fagan, *The Rape of the Nile: Tomb Robbers, Tourists, and Archeologists in Egypt*, (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1975), 11, *passim*.

⁴⁹EKK, EKK Items No. 7, "Journal of a trip in Egypt," EKK Papers.

⁵⁰Ibid.

Asyût, then a city of about five thousand inhabitants, near the ancient city of Lykopolis. He began to feel wonder at the accomplishments of the ancient Egyptians. Looking at the chambers and temples cut into the limestone, he "recalled the labours of the herders who had constructed them, the catacombs. Their sleeping inmates and the temples spoke for the first time of reason and superiority."⁵¹

While Egypt was hardly untrodden ground by European and American tourists at this time, Kane still found traveling dangerous. One morning his party was raided by a group of Arabs on horseback, whom they had to fight off with guns. Danger came from the crocodiles in the Nile as well, but this did not prevent Kane, in one of his more fool-hardy moments, from swimming across the river, "to the excessive consternation of my boatmen."⁵²

Misfortune also struck him in Egypt. To clean out his boat one day, he took out most of his possessions and placed them on a platform of boards which stretched from the riverbank to the gunwale of his grounded boat. With his things in this position he went to sleep that night, only to wake up in the morning to find everything gone. Apparently that night the water level had risen slightly, allowing the boat to float away and dump his platform of boards and his baggage into the Nile. Following the bank of the river, he recovered the boat and some of his things, yet much was irretrievably lost.

His list of lost items indicates something of his collecting habits. They include a collection of minerals, pressed plants, journals and papers of his time in Whampoa and Luzon, and, most interestingly, a collection of human skulls of the different ethnic groups he had encountered on his travels, as well as the entire skeleton of a Chinese woman. These he had planned to present to the well known craniologist, Samuel Morton, on his return to Philadelphia. Morton promoted a uniquely nineteenth-century brand of scientific racism. His studies of the relative intelligence of the various "races" of mankind were

⁵¹Ibid.

⁵²Ibid.

based on measurements of the cranial capacity of skulls from around the world sent to him by travelers like Kane.⁵³

The loss of these collections and journals was a blow, yet Kane continued up the Nile anyway, describing in detail all that he saw. Soon, with characteristic reckless curiosity, he was climbing up the legs of the huge Colossi of Memnon near ancient Thebes to try to read an inscription. A few days later "low spirited and longing for excitement," he set off with his dragoman, Hassan, on a camel trek in the desert to see the Temple of Ather at Tentyred and the grave of Osiris at Abydos. But by this time he was becoming increasingly depressed, and the hot sun of Egypt and the discomforts of camel travel were wearing down his already poor health. After two years, the wonders of travel in exotic places was getting old for him and no longer generated the excitement of his first travels in India.⁵⁴

As the summer of 1845 commenced, Kane headed for Europe, and by mid-July he was in Paris. Apparently he toured much of Europe, but once again we have only Elder to rely on for this part of his journey. Elder summed up the frantic pace of Kane's travels in the Mediterranean in one dense paragraph.

He went from Athens to Eleusis, thence to Plataea, to Leuctra, to Thebes, to Cheronaea, to Livadia; then to the top of Mount Helicon, and there cut a walking-stick from the brink of Hippocrene, which he brought home for his father, with the motto engraved upon the ring, *Fonteprolui Caballino*. Thence he passed on to Thermopylae and the Zietoun Gulf, returned by Parnassus to the Delphic oracle at Castri, bathed in the fountain in which the Pythoness was wont of yore to plunge before she mounted the tripod to utter her thrice-sacred oracles, and descended to the plain by Galixidi and Salona, crossed the Gulf of Lepanto in an open boat, visited Megaspelion and Vostitza, traversed the Morea thoroughly, and then took a steamer from Patras for Trieste by the Adriatic Sea.⁵⁵

⁵³EKK, EKK Items No. 7; On Samuel Morton see William Stanton, *The Leopard's Spots: Scientific Attitudes Toward Race in America, 1815-59*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1960), 28-40, passim.

⁵⁴EKK, EKK Items No. 7.

⁵⁵Elder, 96.

By the end of the summer the world traveler was home in Philadelphia, ready to begin the next phase of his life.⁵⁶

* * *

Elisha Kane was not a typical antebellum American. While many American seamen and merchants traveled around the world's oceans at this time and visited ports like Rio de Janeiro, Bombay, and Whampoa, few traveled inland to the extent that Kane did. His travels required time and resources that few Americans could spare. Yet, if we look at Kane's attitude rather than his actions, we see that in many ways he was representative. Geographic exploration was a source of great popular interest in antebellum America. Interest in far-away places and exotic and wonderful people and landscapes was shared by countless Americans and was reflected in the literature of the day, in popular magazines and newspapers, and in scientific circles.

The United States was a large and culturally diverse nation, but, by looking to the exotic and the foreign through the eyes of travelers and explorers, Americans could develop a sense of themselves in contrast, and position America politically, economically, and culturally in the global arena. For centuries, since Columbus first landed in the West Indies, the New World had been the object of European wonder. As Stephen Greenblatt has shown, wonder at the marvels of the New World was a part of the process by which Columbus and others sought to possess America.⁵⁷ Throughout the eighteenth and early part of the nineteenth centuries, the American colonies and, later, the young United States, had continued to be the object of European interest. European travelers such as Alexis de Tocqueville toured the United States, wrote about American people and institutions, and

⁵⁶Elder, 97; Corner, 46-48.

⁵⁷Stephen Greenblatt, *Marvelous Possessions: The Wonder of the New World*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 14, 19, 83, passim; In a similar way, but for a different context, Edward Said has shown that "Orientalism" or the Western study of a variously defined Orient has been a cultural companion to Western imperialism, Edward Said, *Orientalism*, (New York: Vintage Books, 1979), 31-38, passim. See also Mary Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation*, (New York: Routledge, 1992).

described the physical characteristics of the New World. Yet, as the middle of the century neared, the United States reached a point where Americans were no longer satisfied with being the objects of other travelers' curiosity. Ralph Waldo Emerson had delivered his lecture "The American Scholar" in 1836, declaring that Americans needed to produce their own arts, literature, and scholarship. As part of this process, American readers shifted from narratives by Europeans traveling in the United States to narratives by Americans traveling in the rest of the world.⁵⁸

Travel was part of the process by which the United States became a nation. Lewis Perry has claimed, "To a striking extent, intellectual activity in Antebellum America consisted of travel and writing or speaking about travel." This became a part of the national character of the time. Perry continues, "To travel, or to read about travel, was, after all, the appropriate way to learn about and to present knowledge about a nation on the move."⁵⁹

Accounts of foreign lands were everywhere in nineteenth century America, especially in literature. As Ahmed M. Metwalli has pointed out, "Almost every prominent American literary figure of the nineteenth century has written one type or another of travel book or based some of his literary output on his experiences of travel in foreign lands."⁶⁰ Herman Melville's most popular works, *Typee* (1846) and *Omoo* (1847), were set in the South Seas, while Edgar Allan Poe often had his heroes, such as Arthur Gordon Pym, embarking on voyages to strange lands both real and imaginary. One of the most popular books of the 1840s was Richard Henry Dana's autobiographical tale *Two Years Before the Mast* (1840), the story of a young law student's years at sea.⁶¹ Even authors not typically

⁵⁸Ralph Waldo Emerson, "The American Scholar," *The Collected Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson: Volume I, Nature, Addresses, and Lectures*, Robert Spiller and Alfred R. Ferguson eds., (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1971), 49-70.

⁵⁹Lewis Perry, *Boats Against the Current: American Culture Between the Revolution and Modernity, 1820-1860*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 129.

⁶⁰Ahmed M. Metwalli, "Americans Abroad: The Popular Art of Travel Writing in the Nineteenth Century," in Steven E. Kagle eds., *America: Exploration and Travel*, (Bowling Green, Ohio: Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1979), 68.

⁶¹Carl Bode, *The Anatomy of American Popular Culture, 1840-1861*,

remembered as travel writers, like William Cullen Bryant, Washington Irving, and a host of lesser authors, tried their hands at the genre.⁶²

Not only literary writers, but also scientists, produced travel accounts that reached a wide popular audience. Charles Darwin was known for his *Voyage of the Beagle* (1839) long before anyone heard of his theory of natural selection, and Americans avidly read German traveler Alexander von Humboldt's *Personal Narrative* (1834). Much of the work read by Americans originated in Europe, but a growing amount of scientific exploration, like Charles Wilkes' narrative of the United States Exploring Expedition and John C. Frémont's narratives of his western explorations, originated in America and traveled the Atlantic from west to east.⁶³

Most travel writing was not as up-scale as Melville and Poe or Darwin and Humboldt. One of the most popular American travel writers of the middle of the nineteenth century was Bayard Taylor, whose books (perhaps deservedly) now lie virtually unread.⁶⁴ Taylor's writing was the nineteenth-century literary equivalent of a collection of color photographs, as he gave detailed visual descriptions of the many remote places he visited.⁶⁵ Travel writing was not just found in books, and was not just by serious authors. Newspapers, weeklies and monthlies routinely published serialized articles by people who had visited some remote land. Metwalli observes, "The romantic adventurer, the explorer,

(Berkeley: University of California Press, 1960), 221-235.

⁶²Metwalli, "Americans Abroad," 74.

⁶³Charles Darwin, *The Voyage of the Beagle*, (New York: Penguin Books, 1989 [1839]); Alexander von Humboldt, *Personal Narrative of a Journey to the Equinoctial Regions of the New Continent*, Jason Wilson trans., (New York: Penguin Books, 1995 [1834]); Charles Wilkes, *Narrative of the United States Exploring Expedition During the Years 1838, 1839, 1840, 1841, 1842*, 5 vols. (Philadelphia: Lea and Blanchard, 1845); John Charles Fremont, *Report of the Exploring Expedition to the Rocky Mountains in the Year 1842, and to Oregon and North California in the Years 1843-44*, (Washington: Gales and Senton, printers, 1845) V. Ponko, Jr., "Science in the Exploration Narratives Authored by U.S. Naval Officers," in Kagle, *America: Exploration and Travel*, 92-100.

⁶⁴Bode, *Anatomy*, 221-235.

⁶⁵For example: Bayard Taylor, *Views A-foot: or, Europe Seen with Knapsack and Staff*, (New York: Wm. L. Allison, 1848); Bayard Taylor, *The Lands of the Saracen: or, Pictures of Palestine, Asia Minor, Sicily, and Spain*, (New York: G.P. Putnam & Co., 1855).

the missionary, the merchant or mercantile agent, the diplomatic and military envoy, as well as the man of letters, were all able to reach and influence the public in one way or another.”⁶⁶

Nineteenth-century Americans did not just read about travel, and interest in travel was not just a part of literary and scientific culture. Americans could learn about the wonders of geography by going to hear lectures at their local lyceums or lecture halls. The antebellum years were the golden age of the American lyceum, dedicated to the task of disseminating useful knowledge to all Americans through informative lectures. Travelers like Bayard Taylor, who was known to give lectures dressed in Arab garb, were popular with the local lyceums.⁶⁷ Urban Americans could visit dime museums like Barnum’s American Museum in New York to see artifacts from far away lands, some of which were more genuine than the half monkey/half fish Feejee mermaid. In Barnum’s cosmorama section, even the poorest class of citizen could afford to pay the quarter dollar necessary to peer through peep-holes at views from around the world.⁶⁸ Similarly, wealthy gentlemen could join the new scientific and geographic societies which emerged in this era, where science and exploration could be discussed as a scholarly pursuit. The Smithsonian was founded in 1846, the American Association for the Advancement of Science in 1848, and the American Geographical and Statistical Society in 1852.⁶⁹ Much of the work of these societies revolved around discovery dependent on foreign travel.

Much interest in the wonders of the globe fell somewhere between the scientific and the sensational, as intellectual entertainment aimed at a mass audience. Anyone in an urban area could go downtown to see panoramas of far-off places. This announcement of

⁶⁶Metwalli, “Americans Abroad,” 68.

⁶⁷Carl Bode, *The American Lyceum, Town Meeting of the Mind*, (Carbondale, Illinois: Southern Illinois University Press, 1956), 217-219.

⁶⁸Neil Harris, *Humbug: The Art of P. T. Barnum*, (Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1973), 33-57; Andrea Stulman Dennett, *Weird and Wonderful: The Dime Museum in America*, (New York: New York University Press, 1997), 32, passim.

⁶⁹Robert V. Bruce, *The Launching of Modern American Science, 1846-1876*, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1987), 187-200, 251-268.

“Professor Sattler’s Cosmoramas” which appeared in *The Knickerbocker* in 1851 is fairly typical.

Again have we of the Great Metropolis occasion to thank our stars that we can travel abroad, and see the rarest marvels of the earth, alike without fatigue, without sea-sickness, and (what is quite as much of an object) without money! The *Second Series of Professor Sattler’s Panoramas* is now open to the public. There is even more variety in the second than in the first series: and nothing can exceed the exquisite truthfulness and beauty of the pictures which make up the present collection. Would you visit the sublime ruins of Karnak, in Upper Egypt, there they are, *as they are in reality*, before you. Would you visit the loveliest spot in all the Gulf of Naples? Lo! the Bay of Sorrento, by Moonlight: a scene of unsurpassed loveliness. Pause and look at ‘Damascus’ in Syria, before you pass on to ‘Bethlehem in the Holy Land,’ crowned with hallowed associations....⁷⁰

When Elisha Kane embarked on his travels he became part of this milieu, and his travel writings, though written primarily for family and friends, conformed to established conventions of describing foreign lands. The natural and human wonders he was curious about were the same ones that thousands of Americans were curious about when they picked up a travel narrative to read or went to the local lyceum to hear a lecture about the marvels of the world.

For Elisha Kane and for many nineteenth-century Americans, foreign travel was a way of satisfying curiosity and experiencing wonder. The appeal was partly intellectual and partly entertaining. The worlds of wonders described in books and presented in dime-museums provided a thrill which also served to validate the culture at home. Kane experienced the wonder of foreign travel directly, but other Americans could seek that experience in a variety of ways.

Kane sought out the exotic in foreign nature and in foreign culture. He admired and described sublime foreign landscapes, exotic species of plant and animal life, and strange natural phenomena. He was part scientist and part curiosity seeker, who seemed, on an intellectual level, to want to understand the diversity of the natural world, but, on an emotional level, simply to experience and communicate its sublime wonders.

⁷⁰*Knickerbocker*, 37 (April, 1851), 371.

He sought out the most exotic and wondrous landscape he could find. Thus he traveled to the Taal lake and volcano where the shores are blackened cinder and the land is barren of vegetation. Elder later claimed that his descent into this crater was aimed at the scientific goal of obtaining a sample of sulfuric water for rational scientific inquiry, but Kane did not mention this goal in his own description. Kane may have had science in the back of his mind, but in the forefront was his sense of wonder and curiosity about a sublime aspect of nature. He descended into the Taal crater for the same reason that New Yorkers went to see "Professor Sattler's Cosmoramas."

Side by side with natural wonders were human wonders. Half naked Brazilians carried heavy jars of water on their heads, Filipino women chewed Betel nuts until their teeth turned black, and Esedro told stories of primitive gods in a volcanic crater. Foreign people behaved in strange ways that led to dangerous and sometimes preposterous miscommunication. Greatest of all human wonders were the colossal monuments of Egypt, whose attraction lay in their incomprehensible magnificence.

All these marvels could be dangerous and inspire fear as well as wonder, but this only added to the pleasure. To swim across a crocodile-infested Nile or dodge sharks in Taal Lake or gasp for breath in a sulfurous crater or fight off Arab horsemen in the desert made the attainment of the exotic more difficult but also more wonderful. These dangers emphasized the threatening nature of foreign lands in contrast to the familiar security of American cultural practices.

Dangers and difficulty added to the status of the traveler and the nation he represented. The traveler possessed and showed himself superior to what he encountered. Contrasting America with geographically remote areas helped to define America by showing what it was not. Kane's description of Brazilian poverty and Brazilian royalty each contain an implied comparison with superior American democratic principles. His description of exotic Filipino beauties must end with disgust at blackened teeth to show that Filipino beauty cannot surpass American beauty. The crater of Taal can be descended by

the American, Kane, yet the islanders who make this descent possible need to be represented as ignorant or absent, just as the Egyptians who take Kane up the Nile must be brutes whose presence does not prevent Kane's journey from being solitary.

No longer the object of European imperialism, America was gradually ceasing to be the object of European wonder. As Kane traveled the world in the early 1840s, America had not yet become the imperialist power it would become by the end of the century, but in turning its attention to the exotic wonders to be found outside its borders, it was already making a cultural shift which helped prepare the way for imperialist escapades in the near future.

Kane's two years spent traveling the globe and interpreting its landscape and people helped to shape him as a traveler. In the years to come he would find a way to build on this foundation to appeal to a much wider audience than just his friends and family. As Kane moved from dilettante traveler to Arctic explorer, he drew on additional aspects of American interest in foreign travel, that would allow him to become a hero of science and humanity in the eyes of his country.

CHAPTER TWO

“COME AND INVESTIGATE:” MYSTERIOUS RAPPINGS IN WESTERN NEW YORK

Lovers of the marvelous usually take great
delight in tales of mysterious knockings. We
have one now to tell.

Rochester Daily American.
April 4, 1848

In late March, 1848, a few months after moving into a new home in the small community of Hydesville, New York, John and Margaret Fox became the victims of a prank perpetrated by their two youngest children. Maggie and Kate Fox enjoyed mischief and often teased both their mother and their niece, Lizzie Fish, who was around their own age.¹ Perhaps the girls were restless and bored after a long northern winter in a new home, or perhaps they were just naturally mischievous, but on a few nights in March, when they were supposed to be sleeping, they engaged in a little foolishness that would have consequences far beyond what they ever intended. Taking apples from the cellar, they tied string to the stems and bounced them on the floor next to their bed, producing sharp rapping sounds.² Naturally the girls' mother and father, who slept in the same room as their children that night, rose to investigate the sounds, but the girls, most likely enjoying their ability to make fools of their elders, denied any knowledge of the source of the knockings. The baffled mother recalled: “The night we heard the rapping, we all got up

¹Fox and her mother both were named Margaret. To avoid confusion I usually refer to the mother as Mrs. Fox, and to the daughter as Maggie or Margaretta as she was called by her friends and family. Similarly her sister is variously known as Kate, Catherine, Cathy, Cathie, and Katie, but I generally call her Kate.

²Reuben Briggs Davenport, *The Death-Blow to Spiritualism, being the True Story of the Fox Sisters, as Revealed by Authority of Margaret Fox Kane and Catherine Fox Jencken*, (New York: G.W. Dillingham, 1888), 84.

and lit a candle; and searched all over the house."³ She found nothing, but the noises continued.

On Friday night, March 31, the girls decided to take the trick a little farther. On this night, Mrs. Fox determined to go to bed just after sunset to catch up on lost sleep. Soon after, the noises began. The children imitated the sounds by snapping their fingers, but to Mrs. Fox's horror, the knocks soon seemed to respond to the children's actions. Mrs. Fox recalled that Maggie next said aloud, "Now do this just as I do. Count one, two, three, four..." as she clapped her hands together. The knocks followed her lead. Then an alarmed Mrs. Fox spoke aloud asking the noises to count to ten, and they did so. "Then I asked the ages of my different children successively, and it gave a number of raps, corresponding to the ages of the children."⁴

The raps had become more than random bumps in the night. Now they were communicating in an intelligent manner, but of course the intelligence was that of two teenage girls. Maggie would later admit that they soon "got the idea of producing with the toe joints similar sounds to those we had made by dropping apples with a string." She continued:

From trying it with our fingers we then tried it with our feet, and it did not take long for us to find out that we could easily produce very loud raps by the action of the toe-joint when in contact with any substance which is a good conductor of sound. My sister Katie was the first to discover that we could

³"Certificate of Mrs. Margaret Fox," in E.E. Lewis, *A Report of the Mysterious Noises Heard in the House of Mr. John D. Fox, In Hydesville, Arcadia, Wayne County, N.Y. Authenticated by the Certificates, and confirmed By the Statements of the Citizens of that Place and Vicinity*, (Canandaigua, N.Y.: E. E. Lewis, 1848), 5; A slightly different, but less reliable, version of Mrs. Fox's statement is also recounted in A. Leah Underhill, *The Missing Link in Modern Spiritualism*, (New York: Thomas R. Knox & Co., 1885), Underhill was a later married name of Leah Fox Fish. More or less similar accounts, which derive largely from Lewis include Eliab W. Capron and Henry D. Barron, *Singular Revelations: Explanation and History of the Mysterious Communion with Spirits*, (Auburn, NY: Finn & Rockwell, 1850); D. M. Dewey, *History of the Mysterious Noises, Heard at Rochester and Other Places, Supposed to be Spirit Communications together with many Psychological Facts and New Developments*, (Rochester, NY: D. M. Dewey, 1850)

⁴"Certificate of Mrs. Margaret Fox," in E. E. Lewis, *Mysterious Noises*, 6.

make such peculiar noises with our fingers. We used to practice first with one foot and then the other, and finally we got so we could do it with hardly an effort.⁵

Convinced that she was communicating with a spirit from another world, Mrs. Fox tried to determine who it was. In doing so she allowed her own beliefs to provide the direction that the story would take, and encouraged her daughters to continue the trick.⁶ She asked if it was an injured spirit and heard knocks in the affirmative. She went on to determine, by means of knocks answering with raps for yes and silence for no, that it was the spirit of a thirty-one year old man who had been dead for two years and was buried in the cellar. After these revelations, Mr. and Mrs. Fox decided that it was time to call in the neighbors.⁷

At about seven-thirty or eight o'clock, John Fox went next door and brought back their neighbor, Mary Redfield. Mrs. Redfield had heard about the mysterious noises earlier from Maggie and Kate, but she thought it was all a joke. She went over to the Fox home "with a good deal of levity, saying that I would go over and have a spree with it, if it was a ghost."⁸ Despite her initial jocularly, when she arrived at the Fox home, she found Mrs. Fox upset and quite serious, and it appeared to her as if "the girls were much frightened." Mrs. Fox demonstrated the strange phenomena for Mrs. Redfield by asking more test questions of the spirit, which were promptly answered with knocks.⁹

Soon more neighbors were summoned to hear the curious knockings and ask questions of the ghost, which at this point was not specifically identified with the presence of the girls. Mrs. Redfield got her husband, Charles, who in turn called in William Duesler and his wife. Mr. and Mrs. Artemas Hyde and David and Elizabeth Jewell also soon

⁵Davenport, *Death-blow*, 90.

⁶Davenport, *Death-blow*, 92.

⁷"Certificate of Mrs. Margaret Fox," in E.E. Lewis, *Mysterious Noises*, 6-7.

⁸"Statement of Mrs. Mary Redfield," in E.E. Lewis, *Mysterious Noises*, 30-31.

⁹"Statement of Mrs. Mary Redfield," in E.E. Lewis, *Mysterious Noises*, 31.

arrived on the scene. Mr. Duesler took charge of the questioning and asked questions which focused on the identity of the spirit and the circumstances of its murder. These questions were answered, as before, by raps for yes and silence for no.

In the same way Mr. Duesler ascertained that it was murdered in the bedroom, about five years ago, and that the murder was committed by a Mr. ----, on a Tuesday night, at 12 o'clock; that it was murdered by having its throat cut, with a butcher knife; that the body did not remain in the room next day, but that it was taken down cellar, and that it was not buried until the next night, that it was not taken down through the outside door, but through the buttery, down the stairway; that it was buried ten feet below the surface of the ground.¹⁰

More questioning revealed that the victim was a peddler who had been murdered for the five hundred dollars he carried. The murderer was identified as a former tenant in the house, John C. Bell, who was then living in nearby Lyons, New York.¹¹ These findings originated in part from the answers Maggie and Kate provided to questions, but mostly from the questions themselves, since Maggie and Kate had only the limited ability to answer yes or no.

That night, when the investigations were done, Mrs. Fox went to sleep at the Redfields, and Maggie and Kate slept at another neighbor's. Mr. Fox and Mr. Redfield stayed to keep watch at the house. On Saturday morning many people came to investigate, as many as three to five hundred by some accounts, but as long as the sun was up they heard no knocks.¹² When darkness fell, however, the knockings resumed, and they continued through-out the next day. The excited community was anxious to solve the puzzle of the raps and to discover the murder if there had been one. They asked the spirit

¹⁰"Certificate of Mrs. Margaret Fox," in E.E.Lewis, *Mysterious Noises*, 8.

¹¹"Certificate of Mrs. Margaret Fox," "Statement of Wm. Duesler, of Arcadia," "Certificate of Mrs. Elizabeth Jewell," in E.E. Lewis, *Mysterious Noises*. Although the name is left blank in the statements of these witnesses, a statement attesting to the character of John C. Bell tacked on to the end of Lewis' pamphlet makes obvious the name of the accused.

¹²Capron and Barron, *Singular Revelations*, 15.

Figures
4 & 5



(Top) The Fox family. From M. E. Cadwallader, *Hydesville in History*.
(Bottom) The Hydesville house, which was later moved by spiritualists to
Lily Dale, New York. From M. E. Cadwallader, *Hydesville in History*.

what part of the cellar his body was buried in, and they started to dig after receiving a reply. They wanted tangible proof to back up the strange sounds, but the diggers hit water and had to stop at less than four feet.¹³

In the days that followed word spread of the mysterious sounds, and hundreds of people came from miles around to satisfy their curiosity.¹⁴ Soon previous tenants of the house told of strange sounds they, too, had heard while living there. On a more sinister level, Lucretia Pulver claimed that, while working for Mr. and Mrs. Bell at the time of the supposed murder, she had witnessed what appeared to be signs of digging in the cellar, which Mrs. Bell explained as rat holes. This, she said, was just days after a peddler had made a visit and then mysteriously disappeared.¹⁵ All signs pointed to a grisly murder by Mr. Bell.

* * *

To the modern reader, these events seem no more than an eerie and somewhat typical ghost story. We have heard it all before: the restless spirit of a murder victim, buried under the house, emerges at night to disturb the sleep of the new family living there. Surprisingly, however, the events in Hydesville became more than a simple ghost story or prank in the months and years that followed; they became the starting point for a new mass movement, called spiritualism, that would influence tens of thousands of people in America and Britain for the remainder of the nineteenth century.

Spiritualism, in a variety of forms, became one of the largest popular movements of the latter half of the nineteenth century. It promised communication between the worlds of the living and the dead and an end to fear of death and loss of loved ones. Its influence would be felt from the working class all the way to the White House, and it would cross the Atlantic to become a mass movement in Victorian Britain as well.

¹³"Certificate of Mrs. Margaret Fox," "Statement of Wm. Duesler," in E.E. Lewis, *Mysterious Noises*, 8-9, 14-16.

¹⁴*Rochester Republican*, April 19, 1848.

¹⁵Statement of Lucretia Pulver," in E.E. Lewis, *Mysterious Noises*, 37-39.

The spiritualist movement espoused a number of different philosophies, which in recent years have drawn increased attention from scholars. The first important work on spiritualism came from R. Lawrence Moore who studied the way spiritualism reflected the cultural authority of empirical science in the nineteenth century. Moore convincingly argued that spiritualists rejected supernatural or occult explanations of spiritual phenomena in favor of an approach which borrowed the methods and language of science. The seance was thus modeled after the scientific experiment in the hopes of making religion rational by replacing faith with proof.¹⁶ More recently Ann Braude and others have studied the relationship between spiritualism and radical reform movements, especially the women's rights movement. Most spiritualists were supporters of radical reform, and many leading figures in the nineteenth-century women's rights movement were ardent spiritualists. Focussing mostly on later "trance speakers" Braude has argued that spiritualism provided a means for nineteenth-century women to claim their voices.¹⁷ Taking the topic further, an interesting new study of spiritualism by Bret Carroll has approached the subject from a theological perspective. Despite the notoriously fragmented and uncentralized nature of the nineteenth-century spiritualist movement, Carroll has looked at a core group of spiritualists who espoused fairly consistent beliefs and has argued that, for this core group, spiritualism provided a sense of order to the cosmos in a time of increased fragmentation in other areas of life.¹⁸

¹⁶R. Lawrence Moore, *In Search of White Crows: Spiritualism, Parapsychology, and American Culture*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977).

¹⁷Ann Braude, *Radical Spirits: Spiritualism and Women's Rights in Nineteenth-Century America*, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1989); Ronald Walters, *American Reformers, 1815-1860*, (New York: Hill and Wang, 1978), 145-172; Robert W. Delp, "American Spiritualism and Social Reform, 1847-1900," *Northwest Ohio Quarterly*, 44(4), (1972), 85-99.

¹⁸Bret Carroll, *Spiritualism in Antebellum America*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997). Another good account of the beginnings of the Spiritualist movement is Ernest Joseph Isaacs, *A History of Nineteenth-Century American Spiritualism as a Religious and Social Movement*, Ph.D. dissertation, University of Wisconsin, 1975.

Most of these historians concede that spiritualism had its start as a popular movement with the knockings at Hydesville, but considering this, it is surprising how little significance they have found in Maggie and Kate Fox, who actually began the knockings. Most historians have stressed the relative unimportance of the Fox sisters themselves, emphasizing instead the views of those who went to their seances and became convinced of the spiritual nature of the raps. This is because the sisters never took a leadership role within any spiritualist organization. They never advocated a particular theological or scientific point of view or attempted to explain the mysterious knockings at all. Ann Braude puts it bluntly. "Although the Fox sisters converted many influential people and provided the model for other mediums, they never participated actively in the movement they began. Their own lives... add little to an understanding of the role of Spiritualism in American history."¹⁹

The problem with this view is that it stresses the content of spiritualist philosophy to the exclusion of the performance and form of the rappings themselves. Despite their lack of participation in later spiritualist organizations, Maggie and Kate Fox were crucial to the development of spirit rapping in the United States. Their importance does not lie so much in the science, theology, or reform movements that became closely tied to spirit-rapping later on. Rather it lies in the way that, in the early years, they created a form and structure for spiritual manifestation and investigation that appealed to nineteenth-century audiences, one that allowed participants to create their own meanings for the strange phenomena they witnessed. Before spirit rapping could become linked to other aspects of American culture, it first had to catch the attention of masses of American people. The story of how spirit rapping entered into the mainstream of American culture is the story of the Fox sisters. It is a story a culture's love for investigation and debate. It is the story also of a culture dedicated to satisfying its curiosity about the unknown and perhaps the unknowable.

* * *

¹⁹Braude, *Radical Spirits*, 18.

When Kate and Maggie began the rappings, the Fox family lived in a four-room rented house in Hydesville, New York. Hydesville was a rural farming community within the township of Acadia in Wayne County, but the signs of a rapidly growing commercial society could be found just a few miles south in Newark, where boats traveled the recently constructed Erie Canal on their way west toward Lake Ontario or east to the Hudson River, bringing the products of western agriculture to the commercial markets in the East. Maggie's father, John D. Fox, was a blacksmith and a farmer, who was considered by his neighbors to be a respectable and trustworthy member of the community. His wife, Margaret, was a devout Methodist who had raised six children since her marriage almost thirty-five years before.²⁰ Of the six children, four were now adults living away from home.

Margaret and John Fox had not lived together continually since their marriage. After their first four children were born, John had abandoned his wife and children because of his problem with alcohol. He returned years later, and he and Margaret had two more children. Margaret, who was called Maggie or Margaretta to distinguish her from her mother, was born around 1833 and was now fifteen. Her sister Catherine, called Kate or Cathy, was two or three years younger.²¹ Of the older four children from the earlier years of the marriage, the oldest daughter, Ann Leah Fish, had married at an early age and then been deserted by her much older husband. Leah, as she was known, was left with a daughter, Lizzie, to care for. Lizzie Fish often lived in the Fox household in Hydesville.

²⁰Herbert Jackson, *The Spirit Rappers*, (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1972), 2; "Statement of Walter Scotten," "Certificate of Mrs. Elizabeth Jewell," "Statement of Wm. D. Storer," in E.E. Lewis, *Mysterious Noises*, 16-17, 19-20, 26-27; Eliab Capron and Henry D. Barron, *Singular Revelations*, 12.

²¹Some accounts place the sister's ages at as young as 6 and 8, but these accounts stem from Maggie Fox's later wish to disassociate herself from Spiritualism by presenting herself as an innocent child, drawn in against her will. Samples of Maggie and Kate's writing from 1850 appear to be those of girls at least in their middle teens. The ages 15 and 12 were given by Mrs. Fox in her signed statement published in E.E. Lewis, *Mysterious Noises*, 6. These approximate ages are also supported by the testimony of most people who met them at around this time.

while her mother earned a living teaching piano lessons in the city of Rochester, about thirty miles to the west. Two other older children also lived nearby. The only son, David, lived with his wife, Elizabeth, in Acadia township, as did another married daughter, Maria Smith.²²

Soon after the rappings began in Hydesville, the curiosity generated by the Fox sisters was recognized as a marketable commodity by near-by publishers. Some authors of early published accounts of the rappings played up the mystery of the knocks and invited their readers to draw their own conclusions. Others dismissed them as an April fools joke. All however, expressed a desire to get to the bottom of the mystery, to find out whether the rappings came from this world or the next.

An editor from nearby Canandaigua, New York, E. E. Lewis, was the first to publicize the rappings for a reading public. In late April, he printed a pamphlet containing the signed statements of many of the principle witnesses to the rappings. It remains the earliest and best source for the rappings, and most later accounts stem from it.²³ Lewis knew the way to make his pamphlet sell was to follow the example of the sisters in offering a strange phenomenon without definitive explanation. Presenting himself as an impartial observer, he laid out strange and unbelievable evidence and invited his readers to "step forward and solve the mystery, if they can." He even offered a \$50 reward to anyone who could do so.²⁴ His pamphlet could be read as proof by those who believed in ghosts or as a challenge to those who sought to uncover the fraud. According to Maggie, Lewis was

²²Herbert Jackson, *The Spirit Rappers*, 2, 20-23; A. Leah Underhill, *The Missing Link in Modern Spiritualism*, (New York: Thomas R. Knox & Co., 1885), 30-31.

²³One prevalent problem in secondary historical accounts of the rappings at Hydesville is that they often go to later accounts by Leah [Fish] Underhill or Eliab Capron for information. Both Capron and [Fish] Underhill are very partisan sources who tend to exaggerate and embellish the original story. There is as yet no good biography of any of the sisters, although there have been attempts. Jackson, *The Spirit Rappers*, is useful, but it is made up mainly of lengthy quotes from newspaper reports without any citation; Also Earl Wesley Fornell, *The Unhappy Medium*, (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1964). Fornell's is a factually unreliable biography of Margaret Fox.

²⁴E.E. Lewis, *Mysterious Noises*, 3-4, 42.

not the impartial observer he claimed to be. She later claimed, "much of the effect of the 'rappings' is greatly exaggerated in this statement which my mother was made to write." It was perhaps even dictated by "men who desired to make public the details of the 'rappings' and to make money by the sale of a pamphlet describing them."²⁵ As a journalist, Lewis knew that if he engaged his readers' curiosity by giving them a mystery to solve, they would buy his pamphlet.

Contemporary local newspaper reporters were more skeptical. They invited readers to do a better job of detection than the foolish people of Hydesville. The *Rochester Daily American* adopted a superior and disbelieving tone and reported that the superstitious people of Hydesville were creating meanings for the sounds to fit their own preconceptions. With an air of sarcasm it explained, "We would not for a moment insinuate that the girl did it, because everybody was determined to consider it supernatural, and it is safest to go with the majority." The article went on to observe that questions were put and interpretations made in accordance with pre-existing beliefs. "By this time the story of a murdered peddler became current. No one doubted that his unfortunate bones were crying for vengeance. Questions were framed to meet the exigency, and answers were received in distinct knocks, which the excited crowd were at no loss to interpret." The mystery of the knockings was not a supernatural mystery in this report, but it was still a challenge to figure out how it was done. It was an opportunity for intelligent men to prove that they were not fools by exposing the fraud.²⁶

Despite the sporadic press coverage in near-by Rochester, the knockings in Hydesville were still primarily a local affair. Assorted versions of the story appeared in various newspapers as filler, but there was not a great deal of emphasis placed on these stories or even in getting the facts straight.²⁷ By April 22, the *Rochester Daily American* reported, "The excitement which this unparalleled humbug has created, has in a measure

²⁵Davenport, *Death-blow*, 90-91.

²⁶*Rochester Daily American*, April 4, 1848.

²⁷*Rochester Republican*, April 19, 1848; April 27, 1848.

subsided, and the people who were a little credulous at first, are now beginning to countenance the idea that they have been unequivocally gulled.” They speculated that perhaps the whole thing had been an April fools joke.²⁸ But the story did not go away, since the mystery had not been solved. After Lewis’s pamphlet appeared, the *Rochester Republican* summarized it in a long article, but two weeks later, in an attempt to bring closure to the story, it reported that the whole thing had been exposed as a fraud perpetrated by John Fox banging the headboard of the bed against the wall. Where it got this faulty information is not clear.²⁹

One person who learned of the Hydesville rappings from Lewis’s pamphlet was Maggie and Kate’s older sister, Ann Leah Fish (who went by Leah). In May the mother of one of her piano students showed Fish a copy of Lewis’s pamphlet. That night Fish boarded the Erie Canal packet-boat to Newark to find out for herself what was going on. She found the family at her brother David’s house in Hydesville, where the whole family was staying after fleeing the house of the raps.³⁰ By this time the family had learned that the knockings seemed to be associated with Maggie and Kate, in whose presence they always occurred. Unfortunately the strange sounds had followed them to David’s house. Leah Fish was not fooled about the sounds as most people were. As soon as she arrived from Rochester, she took her two younger sisters aside to interrogate them and find out how the raps were produced. She did not, however, choose to expose them. Instead she learned how to produce the sounds herself.³¹

While we do not know much about Leah Fish’s life to this point, what we do know indicates a difficult existence. Born in 1814, she was still a young girl when her father

²⁸*Rochester Daily American*, April 22, 1848.

²⁹*Rochester Republican*, May 4, 1848; May 18, 1848; *Auburn Daily Advertiser*, May 12, 1848; May 27, 1848.

³⁰A. Leah Underhill, *The Missing Link*, 31-32. This book, written much later by Leah, needs to be read with a great deal of skepticism, as much of it is embellished and exaggerated in order to support the reality of spiritualist phenomena. It was described by Maggie Fox as a “lying book.” Davenport, *Death-Blow*, 89.

³¹Davenport, *Death-Blow*, 102-104.

deserted the family. There is no evidence which tells what the family did to support itself while John Fox was gone, but life could not have been easy for any of them. Fish, by her own report, was only fourteen years old when she married a much older man, Bowman Fish. This marriage brought her a daughter, born when Leah Fish herself was still a child. Her husband subsequently deserted her, leaving her to fend for herself. The life of a single teenage mother in nineteenth century America was not an enviable one. Fish did what she could to make a living for herself by teaching piano, and her parents often helped out by taking the child, Lizzie, into their home.³²

It is not surprising, then, that Leah Fish was looking for a way out, and she seems to have realized immediately that the raps had potential. She soon became the active force behind the rappings, and as such she transformed them from a cliché-ridden ghost story about a murdered peddler buried in the cellar into a much larger and more original phenomenon that would appeal to public curiosity about the unknown. Using the excuse that separating the girls might put an end to the sound, she soon convinced her mother to allow Kate to travel back to Rochester to live with her for a while. About two weeks after Fish had first arrived in Hydesville, she, Kate, and Lizzie took the packet-boat back to Rochester. Maggie, who seems to have had some reservations about her older sister, chose to stay with her mother. Fish later explained this separation of the sisters as an unsuccessful attempt to stop the rappings, but they only increased and became more elaborate now that she was in charge.³³

According to her account, which she repeated to acquaintances in Rochester and eventually published in her book, her family was tormented by the spirits back at Rochester, and however much they tried to discourage and ignore them, they persisted as a sort of curse. They produced terrorizing sounds, moved beds as they tried to sleep, and hurled things through the air. Calvin Brown, a friend of the family, soon came to live with

³² A. Leah Underhill, *Missing Link*, 30-31.

³³A. Leah Underhill, *Missing Link*, 32-33; Davenport, *Death-Blow*, *passim*.

them, but he seemed only to have become a target to the spirits. Soon Maggie and Mrs. Fox came to Rochester as well, and the activity of the spirits increased.³⁴

Maggie Fox later claimed that her older sister forced her and Kate into continuing the rapping, but this seems to be an exaggeration. While Leah Fish, as the oldest, was the most dominant of the three sisters, the younger girls seem to have enjoyed continuing the raps.³⁵ At least a month passed in Rochester during which Maggie, Kate, and Leah played their tricks as spirits on Mrs. Fox and Calvin Brown. The girls, who seemed to see the whole thing as a game, honed their skills of deception, using Calvin and Mrs. Fox as practice. According to Reuben Davenport, whose 1888 account was authorized by Maggie and Kate Fox,

[Maggie Fox] remembers with tolerable distinctness the antics that distinguished this sojourn of her mother, herself and her sisters in the Rochester house. She and Katie did indulge in wild larks in the sleeping rooms of the family at all hours of the night. The "whispering" and "giggling," the "scuffling" and "groaning," and the tragic mimicry were natural to childish dare-devils like themselves, and one can well understand how, with the attendant "rappings," the showers of slippers hurled from the "green room," the shaking of Calvin's bed and the "banging" of him on the head, these things may have made the desired impression upon both him and the mother.³⁶

The more the raps went on, however, the harder they were to stop. So many people, including family and friends, had been fooled, that to confess the trick became impossible. "So," according to Maggie Fox, "we went right on"³⁷

During the summer of 1848 the sisters introduced the rappings to a select group of Rochester citizens including Amy and Isaac Post. Isaac owned a local drug store, and he and his wife were active in many reform movements of the day, especially abolition. The fires of religious revival had burned very strongly in Rochester during the 1830s and 1840s. These revivals were part of what historians call the Second Great Awakening, a

³⁴A. Leah Underhill, *Missing Link*, 33-40; Wheaton Phillips Webb, "Peddler's Protest," in *New York History*, 24 (April 1943), 228-250.

³⁵Davenport, *Death-blow*, 36.

³⁶*Ibid.*, 112.

³⁷*Ibid.*, 92.

movement which advocated the moral free-agency of Christians and the ability of individuals to contribute to their own salvation and ultimately the coming of the Millennium. This drive toward Christian perfection fed into moral reform movements such as temperance and abolition.³⁸ The Posts, who were Hicksite Quakers, were at the heart of these movements in Rochester. Other people who attended the first séances with the Fox sisters included evangelical Methodists, Quakers, and prominent reformers, such as Mr. and Mrs. Lyman Granger, Mr. and Mrs. Henry Bush, Elihu Grovers and Reverend Asahel H. Jervis.³⁹

These first spiritualists were a different sort from the Fox sisters or the people of Hydesville.⁴⁰ As respectable urban middle-class reformers, they believed that the world could be changed for the better through their active agency. Leah Fish realized that if the rappings were going to have a future, these were a good group to start with. Fish did what she could to present the rappings as part of a new progressive age of reform, and many reformers soon came to believe that the raps were simply additional evidence that a new era of history was about to begin through the agency of reform-minded Christians. By associating the rapping with people like the Posts and Grangers, the sisters would go a long way towards turning them from mere fodder for ghost stories into a part of the dawning of a new reformed age.⁴¹ As in Hydesville, the audience could determine the

³⁸Paul E. Johnson, *The Shopkeeper's Millennium, Society and Revivals in Rochester, New York, 1815-1837*, (New York: Hill and Wang, 1978); Nancy A Hewitt, *Women's Activism and Social Change, Rochester, New York, 1822-1872*, (Ithica: Cornell University Press, 1984); Ronald G. Walters, *American Reformers, 1815-1860*, (New York: Wang and Hill, 1978); Alice Felt Tyler, *Freedom's Ferment; Phases of American Social History to 1860*, (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1944); Jon Butler, *Awash in a Sea of Faith: Christianizing the American People*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990).

³⁹"Isaac Post," in *Dictionary of American Biography*, Dumas Malone eds., (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1935), VIII, 117; Herbert Jackson, *The Spirit Rappers*, 25.

⁴⁰I use "spiritualists" and "spiritualism" to refer to those who believed in the spiritual nature of the raps and their beliefs, while I use "spirit rapping" to refer to the production of the noises by those who may or may not have believed in spiritualism.

⁴¹On the relationship between spiritualism and reform see, Braude, *Radical Spirits*; Walters, *American Reformers*; Robert Delp, "American

meaning of the raps. But this audience would understand the raps differently. What had been a common ghost story to rural farmers, became a sign of moral reform to urban-middle-class reformers.

The Posts were important to the spread of spiritualism, since they had contacts throughout the national abolitionist network. Amy Post in particular was in regular contact with abolitionist leaders like William Lloyd Garrison and Frederick Douglass. Abolitionist speakers and activists often passed through Rochester and stayed with the Posts when they did so. For instance, when Frederick Douglass first arrived in Rochester, he stayed at the Posts' house.⁴² This meant that after Amy and Isaac began to attend regular seances with the Fox sisters, the word quickly began to spread throughout the national abolitionist community. Not all, or even most, abolitionists joined the Posts in their belief, but they did become interested, since the idea of spirits coming back to earth to guide humanity to a new age seemed consistent with their firm belief in human progress and perfectibility. The Boston abolitionist William Cooper Nell visited Rochester sometime in early 1849 and attended a seance with the Posts, Maggie and Kate Fox, and Leah Fish. He was not yet convinced, but, as he later wrote Amy Post, "I would give worlds to know. Yes to know. That's the word. What it was that pulled my coat on that memorable night." He also reported that William Lloyd Garrison had heard of the raps and was becoming curious.⁴³

Other friends of the Posts expressed doubt and worry about their involvement in such a dubious-sounding new fad. Fellow Quaker John Willis wrote Amy that, while at a meeting, he told friends who inquired after her that "thee and Isaac... was as much like a balloon as anything that I could compare you to, ready to be taken any way the wind

Spiritualism and Social Reform, 85-99.

⁴²Frederick Douglass, *The Life and Times of Frederick Douglass, Written By Himself*, (Hartford, Connecticut: Park Publishing Company, 1881), 232.

⁴³William Cooper Nell to Amy Post, August 11, 1849, December 12, 1849, Amy and Isaac Post Family Papers, Department of Rare Books and Special Collections, University of Rochester Library (hereafter referred to as Post Papers).

should blow.” Willis made no secret of his distaste for the spirits, calling spiritualism “the most absurd and ridiculous thing that ever was believed in on the face of this earth.”⁴⁴

One can only speculate as to what the three sisters hoped to get out of the rappings. It is clear that Leah Fish craved respectability. The rappings may have seemed to her to be a pathway to middle-class status. She was very careful to expose spiritualism only to respectable citizens, a point which she repeatedly emphasizes in her writing.⁴⁵ While spiritualism has often been portrayed as a middle-class movement because of the dominance of such people as the Grangers and Posts, the case is actually a bit more complicated. The Fox sisters’ relationship with these middle-class reformers set a precedent, often repeated, of working-class spirit rappers appealing to a middle-class audience of spiritualists. Rapping thus became a pathway toward the middle-class for women and girls like Margaretta and Kate Fox and Leah Fish.⁴⁶

The idea of using and deceiving people to gain status did not seem to bother Leah Fish, and for the younger girls the rappings were a good way to get love and attention. Both Maggie and Kate Fox formed close relationships with Amy Post, while deceiving her into believing in the spiritual origins of the rappings. At this point in their lives the rappings brought them fun and made them the center of a loving community of caring people. Perhaps they even convinced themselves that they were helping those they fooled, by giving them consoling messages from loved ones and confirmation of their reformist

⁴⁴John Willis to Amy Post, June 21, 1849, Post Papers.

⁴⁵A. Leah Underhill, *The Missing Link*.

⁴⁶A typical example of this was Abby Warner, a disfigured teenage orphan who rapped for middle-class spiritualists in Ohio. Dr. Abel Underhill, *The Arrest, Trial and Acquittal of Abby Warner for Spirit Rapping in St. Timothy’s Church in Massillon O.*, (Cleveland, Gray & Wood - Plain Dealer Steam Press, 1852). Victorian Woodhull, a famous spiritualist and advocate for women’s rights in later years, also came from a poverty stricken background; Barbara Goldsmith, *Other Powers; The Age of Suffrage, Spiritualism, and the Scandalous Victoria Woodhull*, (New York: Knopf, 1998), 8-27. Interestingly this tendency can also be seen in the creation of Mormonism by the poverty stricken Joseph Smith and the less successful “Kingdom of Matthias” by Robert Mathews; Tyler, *Freedom’s Ferment*, 86-88; Paul Johnson and Sean Wilentz, *The Kingdom of Matthias: A Story of Sex and Salvation in 19th-Century America*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994).

beliefs. There is also a possibility, considering their father's history of alcohol problems, that their home lives in Hydesville had not been the best. Their removal from what could have been an unpleasant environment at home to a more caring environment in Rochester as a result of the rappings may have encouraged a continuation of the deception. It is clear from their surviving correspondence that Amy and Isaac Post were loving people who formed very close relationships with those who were part of their movement. By rapping, Maggie and Kate Fox and Leah Fish became part of this intimate community.

A letter Maggie Fox wrote to Amy Post while on a visit back to Acadia Township (Hydesville) during the summer of 1849 shows that her relationship with the Posts was characterized by sincere affection rather than cynical manipulation. In little more than a year, Fox had come to see Rochester as a better home than Hydesville, even though much of her family, including her father, stayed in Hydesville.

Dear Amy you can't think how lonesome it is out here. I think if you were here the time would pass more swiftly. It seems as if I have been here three months instead of three weeks. I am anxious to get back to Rochester again. Rochester is my much loved home, but after all Amy I have some [illegible] times here. If mother could only be with me then I should be happy, but I know she can't be there all the time. Oh Amy, it is a very gloomy day. It has been raining all forenoon. Oh how still and silent it is here today. I love the noise and confusion of the city, but I am something like the woman that became so accustomed to her husband's snoring that she could not get to sleep without it.⁴⁷

Very soon after arriving in Rochester, the sisters, led by Fish, further developed the format of what would become spirit-rapping. An explanation was developed that the sisters had special qualities which made them "mediums" through whom the worlds of the living and the dead could come into contact. This was why the raps only occurred in their presence. Foregoing the random and uncontrolled format of rappings that had occurred at Hydesville, the sisters began to organize controlled seances with rules for proper conduct. Seances would begin with a prayer, while the party sat around a wooden table in a darkened room. If a spirit made its presence felt, participants could ask it yes-or-no

⁴⁷Margaret Fox Kane [Maggie Fox] to Amy Post, August 21, 1849, Post Papers.

questions, or the spirit might "call for the alphabet" by knocking five times in rapid succession. If this happened someone would recite the alphabet until a knock was heard on a particular letter. This would be repeated until words and sentences were spelled out. The spirits had to be treated with great respect, or else they might refuse to participate.⁴⁸

The earliest seances were private affairs, and as a result few records remain to tell what went on during them, but in June 1848, three months after the first raps were heard, a Congregational minister, Lemuel Clark, from Worcester, New York visited the Granger's home in Rochester and became a skeptical participant and observer of some of these early performances. Lyman Granger and his wife, wealthy Methodists, had by this time become believers in the spiritual origin of the raps and believed themselves to be in communication, through the Fox sisters, with their daughter, Harriet, who had died less than two years before. Rev. Clark described the séance to his brother in a letter that November.⁴⁹ The group, which met at the Granger's home, was made up of Mrs. Elihu Grover, Calvin Brown, Leah and Lizzie Fish, Kate and Mrs. Fox, as well as Mr. and Mrs. Granger and their fourteen-year-old daughter, Elizabeth, who was soon to become a medium herself. They sat down around a large cherry table for refreshments, and Rev. Clark was asked to say a blessing. As he did so, he heard rappings that seemed to respond to the prayer. He recounted to his brother, "To all the more devotional parts of the service it responded by rapping." As they drank tea and ate cakes they began to converse with the spirits, who responded to questions with raps for yes and silence for no.⁵⁰

The first spirit to appear was the murdered peddler from the house in Hydesville, whose name had by now been determined through the alphabet to be Charles Rosna. He retold the same old story, but then, led by Rev. Clark, moved on to issues of greater theological importance. When asked by Clark, "Did God send you" the spirit responded in

⁴⁸A. Leah Underhill, *Missing-Link*, 47-56.

⁴⁹Wheaton Phillips Webb, "Peddler's Protest," *New York History*, 24 (April 1943), 228-250.

⁵⁰*Ibid.*, 236.

the affirmative. This prompted the minister to ask, "But what can have been his object, has He any important purposes to accomplish, the fulfillment of which depends on such manifestations from the spirit world as you are now making?" The spirits answered this with louder than usual raps.⁵¹ Clark next saw the table move while no one seemed to be in contact with it, and then the spirit of Harriet Granger joined them and conversed with her parents about her mysterious death. The parents seemed to believe, and the spirit seemed to confirm, that she had been murdered by her husband, who now intended to harm her parents as well. When Clark questioned Harriet, she told him of Heaven, the resurrection, and her growing awareness and moral understanding.⁵²

The next two days at Fish's house Clark heard strange sawing and planing noises, like a coffin being built out of pine boards, and he communicated with the spirits again. He was skeptical, yet baffled, and soon heard raps even when the sisters were not there. "This affair astonished me more than anything or everything I had witnessed. I knew not but some of the company, at other times had practiced legerdemain, but it would be impossible to convince me that Liman Grainger (sic) practiced it, nor can I perceive how it is possible that any person could have practiced deception upon us under those circumstances and in that way..."⁵³

The rappings continued in this private way for over a year. In addition to performing seances in Rochester, the girls traveled and demonstrated their ability as mediums in private homes in western New York. Kate lived for a time in Auburn, New York with Mr. and Mrs. Eliab Wilkenson Capron. Eliab Capron was a friend of the Posts. He had first heard the raps in November 1848. Capron was also a dedicated reformer who served as secretary to the Auburn National Reform Association.⁵⁴ He gradually became convinced of the spiritual nature of the raps and eventually became an important part of the

⁵¹Ibid., 237.

⁵²Ibid., 239.

⁵³Ibid., 245-246.

⁵⁴*Auburn Daily Advertiser*, November, 3, 1848.

development of spiritualism. In Auburn the rappings caught on strongly. They did not confine themselves to the Fox sisters either. 'Mediums' seemed to be popping up all over. Elizabeth Granger, the daughter of Lyman Granger, was soon showing signs of being a medium, as were a number of women in Auburn.⁵⁵ In early 1850 Capron described the spread of the spiritual phenomena:

The first of its being heard in this city [Auburn] was when the youngest daughter of Mr. Fox [Kate] visited our boarding house. After she returned it was heard for some time in the presence of several who had heard the sounds in her presence, and in a few months spread to several families where it has gradually grown more free.... We are informed of at least six families in Auburn who hear more or less of the same sounds.⁵⁶

An important transition occurred in the fall of 1849, when the spirits demanded that their manifestations be demonstrated publicly. To make planning such a demonstration easier, "the spirits," in other words Maggie Fox and Leah Fish, insisted on directing the whole affair. First supporters of the Fox sisters should rent Corinthian Hall, the largest hall in Rochester. There Maggie Fox and Fish would act as mediums (Kate Fox was still in Auburn), while Eliab Capron would deliver a lecture recounting the history of the rapping since they began in Hydesville a year and a half earlier. Presumably the material for Capron's speech came from the sisters. Another supporter, George Willets, "was to act as friend and business man, doorkeeper, etc." Five respected citizens of Rochester, all supporters of spiritualism, were to sit on the platform with the sisters to lend respectability to the whole affair. They were Reverend A. Jervis, Lyman Granger, Simeon Draper, Mrs. Sarah D. Fish, and Mrs. Pierpont. In addition the audience was to select five individuals of their own choosing to act as a committee of investigation. For their part the spirits promised to make raps loud enough to be heard in the large hall.⁵⁷

The advertisements for the demonstrations, which appeared in the local paper, appealed to the curiosity of the public rather than to any religious or reform beliefs. They

⁵⁵E.W. Capron, *Modern Spiritualism*, 66-67.

⁵⁶Capron and Barron, *Singular Revelations*, 40.

⁵⁷A. Leah Underhill, *The Missing Link*, 62-65.

were framed as a challenge to the intelligence of the public. "Let the citizens of Rochester embrace this opportunity of investigating the whole matter, and see if those engaged in laying it before the public are deceived, or are deceiving others, and if neither, account for these truly wonderful manifestations.... Come and investigate." Price-25 cents. After the performances on Wednesday and Thursday, the price of admission was cut in half for the final two shows.⁵⁸

To publicly demonstrate a new phenomenon in this way was not unusual. This was a democratic age where new ideas often were presented for public debate. Sciences (or pseudo-sciences) like phrenology, which claimed to be able to judge personality by reading the shape of a person's head, and mesmerism, an early version of hypnotism, were often demonstrated publicly as a mixture of education and entertainment. Traveling phrenologists and mesmerists went from city to city giving demonstrations of wonderful things, as did practitioners of more established sciences. Mesmerists, phrenologists, and later spiritualists gave peeks into the mystery of the human mind. They claimed to reveal new, recently discovered aspects of the mind and to resolve the relationship between the mind and the body and between matter and thought. The people of western New York were very familiar with these kinds of demonstrations of new phenomena. In December 1848, for example, citizens of Rochester and Auburn could go see Professor Rogers and be amazed by "his miraculous experiments and illustrations" in mesmerism and phrenology.⁵⁹ Or they could read about "'Miss Bertha' the clairvoyant who 'reads without eyes.'"⁶⁰ Just two months before the Fox sisters' demonstration at Corinthian Hall, residents of Auburn could go see experiments in magic and ventriloquism by Mr. Gester along with a "magnificent diorama of the conflagration of Moscow."⁶¹ Or they could take classes in phrenology and mesmerism in the basement of the local Universalist church with

⁵⁸*Rochester Daily Democrat*, November, 15, 16, 1849.

⁵⁹ *Auburn Daily Advertiser*, December 30, 1848.

⁶⁰ *Auburn Daily Advertiser*, July 8, 1848.

⁶¹ *Auburn Daily Advertiser*, September 4, 1849.

Mr. H.E.R. Lewis.⁶² These sorts of demonstrations were not without controversy. Mr. Lewis had to defend himself in the newspapers from the Reverend H. Hicks from charges of being “an Infidel.”⁶³ More controversy and debate in the form of letters to the editor of the *Auburn Daily Advertiser* erupted a month later when Dr. Dods arrived to lecture and give demonstrations and even cure disease with “Electrical Psychology,” his version of mesmerism.⁶⁴

So it was not without precedent when, on the evening of Wednesday, November 14, 1849, the first public demonstration of spirit rapping commenced. Apparently the spirits had a good bit of talent for show business, for their plan to publicize the rappings worked wonderfully, drawing “a few of ‘all sorts of people’” to Corinthian Hall to see the show, according to the *Rochester Republican*.⁶⁵ First, Eliab Capron rose to speak. He recounted the history of the mysterious noises, then, according to the *Rochester Daily Democrat*, went on to discuss the scientific “discoveries of Gallileo, Newton and Fulton, and how their substantial invention and discoveries were laughed at long ago, when Science was in its infancy.”⁶⁶ Clearly Capron wanted to deflect ridicule by presenting the rapping as a new scientific discovery rather than as an occult phenomenon.

Capron linked spiritualism with mesmerist philosophies then current. Mesmerism was developed by an Austrian, Franz Anton Mesmer, in the eighteenth century, but in the 1840s it was experiencing a resurgence of popularity in England and the United States. Mesmerism involved putting subjects into a trance state. This was often called “mesmerizing” or “magnetizing” them. This state was, and still is, only partially understood, but mesmerized subjects showed themselves to be very susceptible to suggestion and could be made to believe almost anything suggested by the mesmerist. On a popular level mesmerism was often used at this time to relieve pain, but it also branched

⁶²*Auburn Daily Advertiser*, September 5, 1849.

⁶³*Auburn Daily Advertiser*, September 11, 1849.

⁶⁴*Auburn Daily Advertiser*, October 20, 23, 26, 1849.

⁶⁵*Rochester Republican*, November 29, 1849.

⁶⁶*Rochester Daily Democrat*, November, 16, 1849.

out to embrace beliefs in such things as clairvoyance, or the ability of the mind to leave the confines of the body to communicate with the minds of others or to “see” things far away. It was only a short step from such ideas to the belief that mesmerism could help bring out people’s latent mediumistic ability by making them more sensitive and in tune with the ‘magnetic fluids’ or ‘ether’ which was supposed to surround all things. If a mind could communicate with another mind while separated from the body, why should this not continue after the body had died? In fact, Edgar Allan Poe had toyed with this very subject in one of his stories.⁶⁷ Capron was at the forefront of those who saw spirit rapping as simply the logical extension of mesmerism and clairvoyance.⁶⁸ The central idea was that a whole other world existed beyond the bounds of the merely physical plane which could be explored by the mind. Just as Elisha Kane explored other geographic worlds, mesmerists, clairvoyants, and now spiritualists would explore other worlds of the mind and soul.

Meanwhile, at Corinthian Hall, Leah Fish and Maggie Fox came onto the stage and produced knockings which continued throughout the show “to the great astonishment of those who had gone thither, with gaping ears, to catch the mysterious sounds.”⁶⁹ Each night the audience elected a committee of five to investigate further and to report back with findings the next night. These committees were allowed to meet privately with Fish and Maggie Fox to investigate. In these investigations the sisters became the objects of scientific inquiry. As the *Rochester Daily Democrat* described, in these private examinations the girls were thoroughly examined.

Several questions were put here and answered, not altogether right, nor yet entirely wrong; but the rapping indicated to the committee that if they would go

⁶⁷Edgar Allan Poe, “Mesmeric Revelation,” *The Short Fiction of Edgar Allan Poe*, (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1990), 139-145.

⁶⁸Eliab W. Capron, *Modern Spiritualism, its Facts and Fanaticisms, its Consistencies and Contradictions*, (New York: Partridge and Brittan, 1855); Alison Winter, *Mesmerised: Powers of Mind in Victorian Britain*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998); Robert Darnton, *Mesmerism and the End of Enlightenment in France*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1968); Robert C. Fuller, *Mesmerism and the American Cure of Souls*, (Philadelphia: University of Philadelphia Press, 1982).

⁶⁹*Rochester Republican*, November 29, 1849.

to Mr. Post's house, it would do more for them than it could where they were. So the committee went, as requested. When at Mr. P's, the rapping was heard on the outside of the front door, after they had entered, and on the door of a closet. By placing the hand on the door, there was a sensible jar felt where the rapping was heard. One of the committee placed one of his hands upon the feet of the women, and the other on the floor, and though the feet were not moved, as far as he could perceive, there was a distinct jar on the floor. Placing the women on an elevated settee, *no sound was heard*, and this failure also happened *when they were placed on a bed*. On the pavement, and on the ground the same sound - a sort of a double rap, as of a stroke and rebound - was distinguishable. When the women were separated, at a distance, *no noise was heard, when a third person was interposed between them, it continued*. The women seemed to be very ready to give every opportunity to the committee to investigate the cause fully, and would submit to a thorough scrutiny by ladies.⁷⁰

These thorough scrutinies by ladies involved having the sisters undress so that their clothing and bodies could be examined.

Each night, after these examinations, the committee came back without answers. Respectable and seemingly intelligent members of the community could not answer the challenge of the Fox sisters and had to publicly admit their defeat to raucous crowds. It would almost have been easier to admit a belief in spirits than to admit to being stumped by a pair of mere girls. One newspaper described the scene when the committee reported on its lack of findings one night. "They concluded that they were no wiser then than they were when they started the search of the ghost. - At this announcement popular feeling began to effervesce, and several gentlemen rose to remonstrate, while the lay members of the committee attempted to explain - all were subdued by the general tumult that ensued."⁷¹

Fox and Fish played their roles well. They made no extravagant claims, and they drew no attention to themselves as individuals. Instead they appeared as innocent and guileless young creatures, unable themselves to account for the mysterious noises that seemed to follow them around. They allowed themselves to be examined, while they surrounded themselves with sincere men and women whom they had fooled, like Eliab Capron. They allowed Capron and others to draw all the attention and make claims about

⁷⁰*Auburn Daily Advertiser*, November 17, 1849. (italics in original)

⁷¹*Rochester Republican*, November 29, 1849.

meaning, while they receded into the background, making their knocks. As a result accounts of these performances at Corinthian Hall tell a story about E.W. Capron, knocking, and committees of investigation, but Leah Fish and Maggie Fox are barely mentioned as individuals.

The Corinthian Hall performances were the launching point of spirit rapping as a popular phenomenon. Shortly after the performances, Capron and his friend George Willets wrote a long letter to Horace Greeley at the *New York Tribune* which was published on November 29.⁷² The result was an avalanche of public debate in the *Tribune*, one of the nation's more influential papers, about the significance of what had happened. None of the previous manifestations had made it into the large New York City newspapers, but now that step was taken. With four successful public demonstrations of the rappings in the fall of 1849, they moved from a local craze to an object of national curiosity. The next step was the big city itself and then a national tour.

* * *

Leah Fish and Maggie and Kate Fox were clearly the driving force behind the emergence of spirit rapping as a popular topic in antebellum America, yet, remarkably little emphasis has been placed on their role by either their own contemporaries or historians. The agency of the sisters has been repeatedly denied by those who study them. One historian who did extensive research on the Fox sisters has gone so far as to claim that they did not even understand "their own mediumistic experience."⁷³ Their story is often told with little more than a passing reference to themselves. The reason is that they played their roles so well. The sisters, led by Leah Fish, judged the temperament of successive audiences and manipulated each to their advantage. The rapping repeatedly changed form. First they were part of a standard ghost story for rural farmers, next they became a sign of

⁷²*New York Tribune*, November 29, 1849

⁷³ Ernest Isaacs, "The Fox Sisters," *The Occult in America: New Historical Perspectives*, Howard Kerr and Charles L. Crow eds., (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1983), 82.

the world's moral awakening for urban moral reformers, next a demonstration of the latest theories in the sciences of the mind, and finally a challenge to the curiosity and intelligence of all Rochester and the nation.

Maggie and Kate Fox and Leah Fish were successful as spirit rappers for much the same reason that their role is often ignored by historians of spiritualism: their success depended upon their own agency remaining unrecognized. They had to appear as passive, as witless, and as innocent, while in actuality they were keenly perceptive observers of human nature. They *actively* created themselves as passive objects of investigation rather than active investigators, a role which conformed well with nineteenth century beliefs about gender, as R. Lawrence Moore has pointed out.⁷⁴ In addition, when they invited people to "come and investigate," they created a situation in which accepted beliefs about women could only reinforce a spiritual explanation for the phenomena they produced. As young women in nineteenth century America, they could easily be perceived as objects of rational study for intelligent and scientific men, but it was difficult for those who believed in the superiority of masculine reasoning capabilities to accept that two teenage girls and their older sister could fool them all. In a sense the Fox sisters gave their audience a choice. They could either believe that two girls could outwit a whole community or they could believe in spirits. Many chose to believe in spirits. The rest declared themselves confused, but almost no one believed that the sisters could successfully hoodwink everybody.

An element of spirit-rapping that has often been neglected, or brushed off as insignificant, was the particular way it appealed to American curiosity. The Fox sisters invited observers to explore, to question, to investigate, and ultimately to provide their own answers. Unlike popular entertainment of our own day, usually structured around an active entertainer and a passive audience, the Fox sisters gave the audience the active role. The rapping seemed to promise answers to life's great questions, but they did this as a tease, forcing participants to create their own answers to suit their own particular beliefs.

⁷⁴Moore, *White Crows*, 106.

The movement could thus grow indefinitely, and its significance could constantly be recreated by those who became spiritualists. This technique was present from the start, for Maggie and Kate Fox would later claim that it was their mother, not them, who came up with the idea of spirits as an explanation for their prank, and it was certainly the questioners like Mr. Duesler who were most responsible for the shape of the story of a murdered peddler that emerged from a yes-and-no interrogation.⁷⁵ In Rochester it was reformers like the Posts and Grangers who turned spirit rapping into a part of antebellum reform, it was Capron who helped link it with popular beliefs in mesmerism, and it was a larger public audience that understood the knocks as a challenge to their intellects. But behind all these explanations were Maggie, Kate, and Leah actively and intentionally providing the context.

Historians of spiritualism have tended to recognize that nineteenth century spiritualism had two interconnected sides.⁷⁶ One side was made up of seekers after truth, who were drawn to the scientific, philosophical, and theological implications of communication with spirits. Andrew Jackson Davis, for instance, popularly known as the Poughkeepsie Seer, predated the Fox sisters. He wrote a number of books on spiritual issues and claimed to be in spiritual contact with the Swedish mystic, Emanuel Swedenborg. The side of spiritualism represented by Davis and by dedicated Christian social reformers like Amy and Isaac Post and Eliab Capron was intellectually and religiously driven.⁷⁷

The other side of spiritualism was popular and sensational. This side of spiritualism confronted the public with unexplained wonders. It challenged its audience to understand phenomena produced by mediums. It also, at least part of the time, engaged in conscious deception and fraud. Like the showman P. T. Barnum, this side of spiritualism sought publicity any way it could get it. It is not surprising that at least two historians of spiritualism have mistakenly identified Barnum as the Fox sisters' publicist. In fact they

⁷⁵Davenport, *Death-Blow*, 92-93.

⁷⁶Isaacs, "The Fox Sisters."

⁷⁷Carroll, *Spiritualism*, passim; Isaacs, "A History."

were never associated with P. T. Barnum, but they did use many similar techniques for publicity.⁷⁸

Unfortunately, too many historians have seen the former side of spiritualism as more historically significant than the latter. They have, in effect, accepted traditional beliefs in a dichotomy between "highbrow" and "lowbrow" culture, and have found greater importance in the more elevated and philosophical side of spiritualism than the tawdry deceit of sensationalism. This dichotomy between the philosophical and sensational sides of spiritualism should not be taken too far. The two sides of spiritualism cannot be entirely separated, nor can either side be separated from the major changes going on in America in the nineteenth century. In the middle of the nineteenth century, America was undergoing a crisis in authority. Gradually, in the decades between the Revolution and the Civil War, on a variety of fronts, Americans broke down old forms of authority and experimented with new forms of authority. In politics, Jacksonian democracy had replaced the older form of republicanism that drove the Revolution. In religion older Calvinist beliefs were replaced by a myriad of different beliefs stressing individual human agency. And in the economy a new market-oriented capitalism was replacing older economic systems.

One common theme running through all these changes was that knowledge about the world had become a matter of public debate. The authority of popular opinion, derived through individual investigation, now determined truth more than the authority of tradition.⁷⁹ This was what made spiritualism possible both as a religious and intellectual movement associated with reform and as a popular sensation which appealed to public

⁷⁸The mistake that P.T Barnum was the Fox sisters publicist arose because when they visited N.Y. city in the summer of 1850 they stayed in a hotel called Barnum's Hotel. This hotel was run by an entirely different Barnum. The mistake was made at the time by non-New Yorkers who were not aware of a distinction between Barnum's Hotel and Barnum's Museum, but was corrected in *The New York Tribune*, July 6, 1850. More recently it has been reinforced in Fornell, *The Unhappy Medium*, 24-27, and repeated by Bret Carroll in his work on spiritualist theology: Carroll, *Spiritualism*, 125.

⁷⁹This idea is used to explain P. T. Barnum in Neil Harris, *Humbug; The Art of P. T. Barnum*, (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1973), 4.

curiosity. Spirit rappers like the Fox sisters invited people to “come and investigate” and thus determine the truth themselves. Nineteenth-century Americans did come and investigate, but they did not all come to the same conclusions. Some found humbug. Others found God. But what they found is less important than their ability and opportunity to investigate, and in this sense spiritualism stands out more for the structure of its performance than for any of its many contents.

CHAPTER THREE

HUMBOLDTEAN SCIENCE AND THE SEARCH FOR FRANKLIN: THE FIRST GRINNELL EXPEDITION

“Elisha has gone to the North Pole.”
Bessie Kane in her Diary,
May 26, 1850¹

From the beginning the Fox sisters were masters at performing for a curious antebellum audience. An interest in exploration of the other worlds of the mind became the foundation for lucrative careers. At the same time, Elisha Kane was slowly learning to do the same thing in the realm of geographic exploration. He came onto the public scene more slowly than the Fox sisters did, but his performance, which came to link science and humanitarianism within a framework of thrilling adventure in a world of wonders, would ultimately bring him the admiration of many thousands of his fellow Americans. He, like the Fox sisters, would become an attraction, but he also attained the admiration of his fellow Americans to a degree which far surpassed the Fox sisters.

Kane's early travels were those of a restless young adventurer with a passing interest in various branches of science. In the years following his return, Kane learned to focus his interests to the point where he became accepted by the scientific community as a colleague and accepted by the American public as a celebrity, humanitarian, and hero of science. Two inter-related developments enabled this transformation. First, Kane was increasingly exposed to the moral, methodological and popular paradigm of “Humboldtian science” that dominated American science during the middle of the nineteenth century. This exposure came in part from his involvement with the United States Coastal Survey under

¹Elizabeth Kane, “Extracts from Pocket Diary,” Dow Collection.

the paternal direction of Alexander Dallas Bache and in part from the popular press.

Second, the U. S. press was growing increasingly interested in the fate of the British Arctic explorer, Sir John Franklin, and his entire crew, who had disappeared from the known world into the strange icy regions near the North Pole on a quest to solve the greatest of all geographical mysteries - the Northwest Passage. Many Americans began to support a U. S. humanitarian mission to help find the lost explorer.

Both developments combined science, morality, and popular curiosity in a unique nineteenth century way that Kane would learn to exploit. Doctor Kane became a member and the chief chronicler of the United States Grinnell Expedition sent out in search of Sir John Franklin. The book he wrote about this expedition made him a well-known public figure, and it was the launching point for his further career as an Arctic explorer. Like the Fox sisters, he learned to play upon themes of mystery and investigation into the unknown to appeal to public curiosity. In doing so he became as much a performer as Maggie Fox, but unlike Fox, he carried with him the weight and cultural authority of mainstream American science.

* * *

For four years after returned from his world tour, Kane's activities were varied and adventuresome. He spent ten months serving on the Navy frigate *United States* stationed off Africa, a service that he despised despite the opportunity it offered him to explore the African coast. The climate of sub-Sahara Africa was devastating to his already poor health, so in the spring of 1847 he was discharged from his duty after contracting a "coast fever."²

Back in the United States he was eager to take part in the Mexican War, which was by this time winding down. He managed to obtain special orders from President Polk to take a message to General Winfield Scott in Mexico City as well as to make a report on medical conditions in U.S. Army field hospitals in Mexico. Kane never got through to

²William Elder, *Biography of Elisha Kent Kane*, (Philadelphia: Childs and Peterson, 1858), 101-107.

General Scott, yet did manage to get wounded in a skirmish with a party of Mexican officers while taking them prisoner. Kane then gallantly saved these captives from his own allies, who wanted to shoot them on the spot. He was again taken ill in Mexico, this time from his wound, and was nursed back to health by his former prisoner, a Mexican General named Gaona.³

After this adventure he returned east, where he was attached to a navy store ship, *Supply*, on which he served for most of 1849, as it delivered stores to navy ships in the Atlantic and Mediterranean. In this job Kane grew to hate navy life and, especially, navy discipline, which he saw as arbitrary and despotic, while the tedium of daily life at sea grated on his restless nature.⁴

In December, 1849 Kane was assigned to a duty more suited to his interests that would have more influence on him - the United States Coastal Survey. Neither of Kane's biographers make much of Kane's four to five months with the Coast Survey. Yet, considering his later scientific career, Kane's time with the Coast Survey was of vital importance to his development as both a scientist and a celebrity. The United States Coast Survey was founded in the early nineteenth century to map harbors and coastline, but as historian Hugh Richard Slotten has shown, from 1843 to 1867, under the direction of Alexander Dallas Bache, "the Coast Survey became the largest and most important institution supporting science in antebellum America."⁵ In particular, Bache and the Coast Survey became the primary organized force in America behind what historian of science Susan Cannon and others have called "Humboldtian science."⁶

³Elder, *Biography*, 110-136.

⁴*Ibid.*, 138-141.

⁵Hugh Richard Slotten, *Patronage, Practice, and Culture of American Science: Alexander Dallas Bache and the U.S. Coast Survey*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 1.

⁶Susan Cannon, *Science in Culture: The Early Victorian Period*, (New York: Science History Publications, 1978), 73-110; Michael Dettlebach, "Introduction," to Alexander von Humboldt, *Cosmos; A Sketch of the Physical Description of the Universe*, (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997), vii-xlii; William Goetzman, *Army Exploration in*

Cannon has perceptively shown that, around the middle of the nineteenth-century, belief in global interconnections among all natural phenomena characterized much scientific inquiry. This view, she argues, was best represented by the German scientist and explorer, Alexander von Humboldt. Humboldt was one of the first European scientists to explore much of the interior of South America during a five-year trip from 1799 to 1804. The Humboldtian approach that grew out of his exploration was to travel the world to measure a variety of physical phenomena on a global scale, often using instruments such as barometers to measure atmospheric pressure, thermometers and theodolites to measure temperature, and dip needles to measure terrestrial magnetism. The data collected by this means could then be tabulated with the data of hundreds of others doing the same thing, with the ultimate goal of discovering global patterns and interconnections.⁷

This included areas not now understood as part of geography, such as geology, geomagnetism, hydrography, astronomy, meteorology, oceanography and even zoology and botany. Bache used the Coast Survey to advance this approach. As one contemporary observer pointed out, the "Survey was made to cover almost the whole range of...science, from the structure of the microscopic dwellers in the bed of the ocean, up to the improvement of lunar tables and the determination of positions of fundamental stars."⁸ When Kane was assigned to the Coast Survey, he became a part of the process of gathering data for Humboldtian science, and he would remain a part of this process even after leaving the Survey. The diversity of his own scientific interests, combined with his restless nature and love of travel, made him the ideal Humboldtian.

the American West, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1959), 16-19, 423; Sloten, *Patronage*, 112-46.

⁷Cannon, *Science*, 73-110; For an interesting treatment of Humboldt's influence in South America see Mary Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes; Travel Writing and Transculturation*, (New York: Routledge, 1992), 111-143.

⁸Benjamin A. Gould, "An Address in Commemoration of Alexander Dallas Bache," quoted by Hugh Richard Sloten, *Patronage*, 116.

On December 24, 1849 Kane wrote to Bache that he had reported to the Secretary of the Navy for work on the Coast Survey and requested instructions.⁹ He was sent south to the Gulf of Mexico, where a team was surveying the delta of the Tombigbee and Alabama Rivers.¹⁰ No detailed accounts of Kane's own life in the Coast Survey exist, yet from Hugh Slotten's descriptions of its unique scientific culture, we can get a good picture of what it was like and how it would have influenced him.

Building upon Cannon's original description of Humboldtian science as a method, Slotten has shown that this approach, especially as practiced at the Coast Survey, had cultural and ethical as well as methodological components. Bache, who was a friend of Kane's father and had probably known Kane since he was a child, had a paternalistic attitude towards his assistants and a moralistic attitude towards science. He expected his assistants, some of whom were naval officers like Kane, others of whom were civilians, to be hard workers and morally upstanding men. Much of the work was outdoors, and the survey crews often slept out in tents for long periods, which Bache considered a wholesome environment. The detailed work of surveying and triangulation seemed to Bache to promote virtuous attributes. In Slotten's words, Bache "viewed scientific progress in republican terms that subordinated individual interests to the common good. As a large-scale cooperative activity, the geographical research pursued by the Coast Survey supported this ideal by involving a large number of practitioners in the search for truth - by building a community of like-minded, truth-seeking inquirers."¹¹

This view of science as a virtuous activity dedicated to the advancement of the common good was of great value to Kane when combined with the Humboldtian methodology. His early travels had been mere wanderings with no greater purpose than the satisfaction of his own petty curiosity. Now Kane had a model for travel and

⁹EKK to Alexander Dallas Bache, December 24, 1849, EKK Papers.

¹⁰EKK to J.D.L Kane (Mother), April 8, 1850, EKK Papers.

¹¹Slotten, *Patronage*, 172.

exploration which combined scientific significance with a higher moral purpose, even if that purpose was vaguely defined as the advancement of knowledge and the "common good." He could now pursue travel as a calling rather than just a pastime.

Through his writings, Humboldt influenced many future naturalists and explorers: Charles Darwin, who took a copy of Humboldt's *Personal Narrative* with him on his voyage on the *Beagle*; John C. Frémont, who named a river in California for him; John Muir, who as a young man admired Humboldt and aspired to become a traveling naturalist.¹² To these people and others, Humboldt's influence was inspirational as well as methodological. Humboldt was held up as a virtuous searcher after truth, who sacrificed his own safety and comfort by traveling to remote regions of the Earth to increase the store of human knowledge.

A third aspect of Humboldtian science moved beyond both its methodological and its ethical component. It was highly popular with a wide-ranging public in America and around the world. The role of Humboldtian science in American popular culture has not yet been seriously considered by historians. Humboldt's influence moved far beyond institutions like the Coast Survey and into American cultural life. Alexander von Humboldt was greatly admired by nineteenth-century Americans and elevated to the status of a popular hero, because he seemed to have special abilities allowing him to contribute to the progress of human knowledge and the ultimate unveiling of life's mysteries. He brought science to a wide audience through books which described his extensive travels and gave scientific descriptions of human life and physical phenomena in various parts of the world.¹³

¹²Cannon, *Science*, 86; Andrew Rolle, *John Charles Frémont; Character as Destiny*, (Norman, OK.: University of Oklahoma Press, 1991), 142; John Muir, *The Story of My Boyhood and Youth*, (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1938), 259.

¹³Alexander von Humboldt, *Personal Narrative of a Journey to the Equinoctial Regions of the New Continent*, (New York: Penguin Classics, 1995 [1805-1835]) and *Cosmos: A Sketch of the Physical Description of the Universe*, (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997

Non-scientists admired Humboldt to a degree bordering on hero-worship. Edgar Allan Poe dedicated his prose-poem, "Eureka," to him, and stories about him often appeared in the popular press.¹⁴ *The New York Daily Times* called him one of "the most world-renowned men of the last half century."¹⁵ *The New York Herald* called him a hero of science.¹⁶ But perhaps Bayard Taylor was the most emphatic. In a story for the *New York Tribune*, which was reprinted in both *Littell's Living Age* and *Eclectic Magazine*, Taylor bluntly asserted that "Alexander Von Humboldt is the world's greatest living man."¹⁷

To writers in the popular press, Humboldt advanced the causes of both science and humanity by unveiling the often wondrous mysteries of nature. Such an achievement had wide romantic appeal. An author in *Eclectic Magazine*, who combined science with sensuality and religious ecstasy to describe Humboldt containing the magnificence and complexity of the natural world within his scientific gaze, was typical:

He has looked upon nature in her aspect of the apparent, and he has investigated her in her essence. All her forms of beauty are to him familiar forms; all her combinations are to him distinguishable, although, to less analytical and less comprehensive minds, they are lost in a great and bewildering unity.... Nature, in all her moods and aspects, has been familiar to him; science, in all its painful and delightful phenomena, as illustrated in himself and declared by himself, and he has taught all nations, by his depositions concerning the phenomena and essence of this wondrous world, to admire and better know its Almighty and glorious Author.¹⁸

An important aspect of Humboldt's approach was his appeal to the public's sense of wonder. Humboldt described things that were sublime and awe-inspiring, such as the volcano of Chimborazo, yet he contained these descriptions within a scientific framework.

[1845-1862]).

¹⁴Edgar Allan Poe, "Eureka, A Prose Poem," (Amherst, New York: Prometheus Books, 1997), 3, 6-7.

¹⁵*New York Daily Times*, May 5, 1853.

¹⁶*New York Herald*, November 3, 1849.

¹⁷*The Eclectic Magazine*, 40(1857), 388; *Littell's Living Age*, 52(1857), 400.

¹⁸*The Eclectic Magazine*, 15(1848), 133.

Just as a mythic hero is made greater by the caliber of the trials he overcomes, the scientific hero is elevated by the sublime wonder of the natural world he describes and explains.

One cannot understand Kane or nineteenth-century American popular attitudes towards science without understanding that the search for knowledge about the physical world was imbued with a belief that the moral advancement of humanity could be achieved by searching for truth about the physical world. The American people made romantic heroes out of those who seemed to contribute to that advancement by explaining nature's wonders. Humboldt was the model, but others, like Kane, followed in his footsteps.

* * *

Kane's understanding of science and exploration matured during his exposure to the Humboldtian approach of the Coast Survey and of the popular press, but he still needed the opportunity to practice what he had learned. This opportunity came when the United States Navy, with the financial backing of New York merchant Henry Grinnell, decided to send out an expedition in search of the lost British polar explorer, Sir John Franklin. Kane volunteered to serve as surgeon on the expedition, and in May 1845 he was on board the brig *Advance* as it set sail for the polar regions.

The history of polar exploration dates back to the sixteenth century, when European explorers first tried to discover a Northwest Passage around North America to Asia. By the nineteenth century, sailors and geographers knew that such a route, if it existed, was impractical because of the ice that blocked the channels even in summer, but in 1818 the British Admiralty decided to explore more of the Arctic and renew the quest for this elusive passage. The quest was motivated by a mixture of scientific curiosity within the Humboldtian model, national pride, and a desire to employ an idle British Royal Navy after the end of the Napoleonic Wars. By 1845, under the direction of John Barrow, Second Secretary of the Admiralty, most of the route had been mapped and quantities of scientific data had been collected by British Naval officers such as John and James Ross.

George Back, Edward Parry, and John Franklin. By 1845 little remained to complete the passage, and the next expedition was expected to succeed.¹⁹

The Royal Navy fitted out a large expedition consisting of two frigates, the *Erebus* and *Terror*, and one hundred twenty-nine men equipped with three years' provisions. The veteran Arctic explorer, Sir John Franklin, was placed in command with two accomplished captains, Crozier and Fitzjames, serving under him. The expedition departed England on May 19, 1845. Two months later they communicated with a whaler in Baffin's Bay. They were never heard from again.

The fate of Franklin became one of the nineteenth century's great mysteries. Reference to it even found its way into Henry David Thoreau's *Walden*, where he uses geographic exploration as a metaphor for, and contrast to, introspection.²⁰ Where had the expedition gone? While practical minds no doubt realized that the expedition had most probably been crushed by the ice and sunk, the aura of mystery around the disappearance intensified public curiosity.

In the spring of 1848, while there was still some slight hope that the members of the expedition could be found, still alive somewhere on the ice, the Admiralty sent out three search parties, one from the east through Baffin Bay and Lancaster Sound, one from the west via the Bering Strait, and one across Canada and down the Mackenzie River to the

¹⁹Jeannette Mirsky, *To the Arctic! The Story of Northern Exploration from Earliest Times*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970), 95-129; Pierre Burton, *The Arctic Grail: The Quest for the North West Passage and the North Pole, 1818-1909*, (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1988; Ann Savours, *The Search for the North West Passage*, (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1999; Trevor Levere, *Science and the Canadian Arctic*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993).

²⁰"What does Africa, what does the West, stand for? Is not our own interior white on the chart? black though it may prove, like the coast, when discovered. Is it the source of the Nile, or the Niger, or the Mississippi, or a Northwest Passage around this continent, that we would find? Are these the problems which most concern mankind? Is Franklin the only man who is lost, that his wife should be so earnest to find him? Does Mr. Grinnell know where he himself is?" Henry David Thoreau, *Walden*, in *Henry David Thoreau; Three Complete Books*, (New York: Gramercy Books, 1993), 389.

Arctic Sea, but by Autumn 1849 they had found no sign of the lost ships. Concern mounted, especially the concern of Lady Jane Franklin, who equipped ships at her own expense to search for her husband and appealed to America to join the search with its large commercial whaling fleet and experienced Arctic sailors.²¹

Lady Franklin's appeal took the form of a personal letter to President Zachary Taylor in April 1849. The letter, which was published in the newspapers, appealed to American humanity and pride, not to mention a 20,000-pound reward being offered by the Admiralty to any ship that could find and assist the lost expedition.²² Secretary of State, John M. Clayton, responded, expressing his belief that "the name of Sir John Franklin has been endeared by his heroic virtues and the sufferings and sacrifices which he has encountered for the benefit of mankind." He went on to say that the American people were deeply concerned for her husband's fate and that the President would do all he could.²³ A few days later, responding to rumors of an American expedition, the *New York Herald* expressed its opinion that Americans would enthusiastically approve of such a mission. The United States Navy Department, however, was reluctant to spend its limited resources looking for lost British sailors. It claimed that no ship was available on such short notice. As May and then June passed, no American expedition was sent, and the opportunity for a mission that summer was gone.²⁴

Despite the failure to send an expedition in 1849, American interest in the missing explorers and polar themes only increased. The American press began to give sympathetic attention to the plight of Franklin and his crew, who were imagined to be yet alive.

²¹Leslie H. Neatby, *The Search for Franklin*, (New York: Walker and Company, 1970), 119; Mirsky, *To the Arctic!*, 130-140; "The Arctic Expeditions," in *Littell's Living Age*, 20(1849), 289-297; *New York Herald*, December 3, 1849.

²²Jane Franklin to Zachary Taylor, April 4, 1849, in *New York Herald*, May 6, 1849.

²³John M. Clayton to Jane Franklin, April 25, 1849, in *New York Herald*, May 4, 1849.

²⁴*New York Herald*, May 10, 1849; *New York Herald*, July 17, 1849.

huddling together for warmth amidst the perpetual Arctic snows. Franklin seemed to embody popular ideals in the Humboldtian model of moral and scientific progress made possible by discovery and sacrifice. Arctic exploration, especially discovering the location of the magnetic pole, was part of the international process of collecting data for the advancement of science, and, as a missing martyr to this endeavor, Franklin soon developed into a popular hero. His fame was intensified by the romantic appeal of his being lost among the strange and sublime landscape of the Arctic, his faithful wife waiting for him at home.²⁵

The *Herald* castigated the Navy Department for its lack of enthusiasm for the project, claiming that they had "thrown themselves in the way of a high and noble enterprise in the cause of science and civilization."²⁶ Once again the images of scientific progress and moral advancement were combined in the popular press in the figure of the explorer, this time heightened by the drama and mystery surrounding the fate of the Franklin Expedition, lost somewhere in the strange Arctic landscape.

* * *

After failing to send an expedition in 1849, Americans did not let another opportunity pass. During the winter plans were made for an expedition for the spring of 1850. As the United States Navy remained reluctant to contribute to the search, a wealthy New York merchant, Henry Grinnell, who was also a founding member, and later president, of the American Geographical and Statistical Society, offered the use of two of his ships.²⁷ With this prompting the Navy decided that it would provide the men and officers.

²⁵For an excellent discussion of the sublime appeal of the Arctic see Francis Spufford, *"I May Be Some Time": Ice and the English Imagination*, (Boston: Faber and Faber, 1996), 16-40.

²⁶*New York Herald*, July 17, 1849.

²⁷"Henry Grinnell," *Dictionary of American Biography*, Vol. IV, Part 2, p.2.

Hearing of the expedition while working for the Coast Survey in the Gulf of Mexico, Kane volunteered to join it. For months he heard nothing from his superiors in the Navy. He knew that his involvement in such a dangerous undertaking would upset his family, yet he confided to his brother his plans to go if chosen. "Seldom, dear fellow, in the routine of our naval profession," he told Thomas, "does self sacrifice and privation connect itself with reward and self approval, and God knows both are involved in a volunteer expedition such as this."²⁸

As spring approached, interest in the expedition mounted. *The New York Herald* took the opportunity to stress patriotic themes. European nations, it asserted, had explored the globe for self-interested reasons associated with empire. United States explorations were different. "They have not only furnished to older nations truer systems of exploration, but have incited in the breasts of our people a heroic ardor to penetrate into the most distant regions." These explorations and the free commerce which followed would, according to the *Herald*, civilize the barbarous regions of the world.²⁹ Volunteers for the expedition were not lacking among either officers or crew.³⁰

Kane did not receive orders to join the expedition until May 12, so he had little time to prepare. In his narrative he described receiving the dispatch assigning him to the expedition while "bathing in the tepid waters of the Gulf of Mexico." "Seven and a half days later, I had accomplished my overland journey of thirteen hundred miles, and in forty hours more our squadron was beyond the limits of the United States."³¹

The expedition, commanded by Lieutenant Edwin J. DeHaven, was composed of two rather small hermaphrodite brigs, *The Advance*, with four officers, including Kane as surgeon, and thirteen men; and *The Rescue*, commanded by passed-Midshipman S.P. Griffin, with four officers and twelve men. When Kane arrived in New York to join the

²⁸EKK to Thomas L. Kane, March 8, 1850, EKK Papers.

²⁹*New York Herald*, February 23, 1850.

³⁰*New York Herald*, May 15, 1850.

³¹Kane, *The U.S. Grinnell Expedition*, 17.

expedition. he later wrote, he "could not help being struck with the universal sympathy displayed toward our expedition. From the ladies who busied themselves in sealing up air-tight packages of fruit-cakes, to the managers of the Astor House, who insisted that their hotel should be the free head-quarters of our party, it was one continual round of proffered services."³² Midshipman Robert Randolph Carter, of the prosperous Virginia Carters, served as first officer on the *Rescue*. He observed in his own journal that everyone expected great success for the expedition, although he was not as optimistic himself, having been pressured into volunteering for the journey by his friend Griffin.³³

The expedition departed on May 24 from the Brooklyn Navy Yard with orders to proceed northward through Davis Strait to Baffin Bay and then west through Lancaster Sound and Barrow Strait. As they passed by the city, its wharves and ships were crowded with well wishers come to see them off. Kane observed, "Cheers and hurrahs followed us till we had passed the Battery, and the ferry-boats and steamers came out of their track to salute us in the bay."³⁴

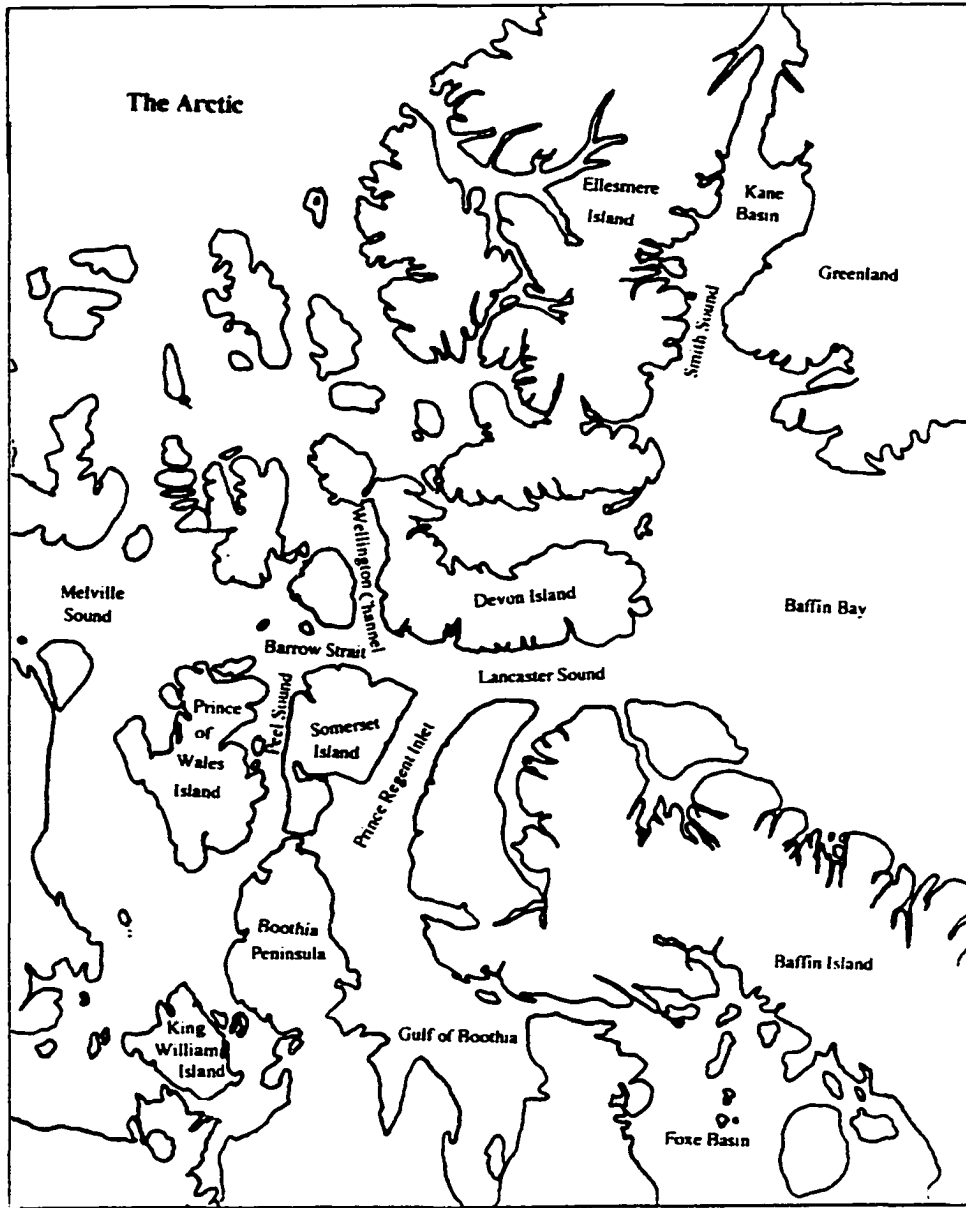
Soon, however, the realities of ship life overcame the excitement and rhetoric of heroic endeavor. Carter, whose enthusiasm for the expedition was minimal, complained in his journal of the unseaworthiness of the *Rescue*. "Did anyone ever see such a beast. She is certainly Amphibious. She takes water in whenever she can, seems to delight in rolling to windward so as to get a whole sea aboard, then by rising forward throws it aft with a rush. Confound this business. The carpenter's work is wretchedly done - decks, deadlights, and hatches leak like sieves. Cabin and Forecastle both wet. Spoke the Advance who says that she is dry below. Again I reflect what a fool I am to expose myself

³²Ibid., 18.

³³Robert Randolph Carter, "Private Journal of a Cruise in the Brig Rescue in Search of Sir John Franklin," in Harold B. Gill Jr. and Joanne Young eds., *Searching For the Franklin Expedition; The Arctic Journal of Robert Randolph Carter*, (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1998), 18.

³⁴Kane, *The U.S. Grinnell Expedition*, 24.

Figure 6



The Arctic.

to such discomforts and vexations.”³⁵ On board the larger brig, *Advance*, Kane was horribly seasick, so much so that DeHaven proposed to Kane that he return home a month into the journey, when they made port at Whale Fish Island in Danish Greenland. Yet Kane’s unbridled enthusiasm for exploration outweighed his bouts with ill health, and he insisted on remaining.³⁶

The American expedition proceeded north as ordered, entering a strange realm of continual sunlight, icebergs, and polar bears. They stopped at some settlements on the west coast of Greenland to acquire last-minute provisions and furs, then attempted to cross to the western side of Baffin Bay to Lancaster Sound. Here they ran into what is known as the “Middle Ice.” Even at the height of summer in Baffin Bay, miles of ice float down from the north and clog the middle of the bay. Before the days of icebreakers, ships wishing to sail from the eastern to the western shore of the bay could cross at either south, middle, or northern passage, yet the most common and safest route for whalers and explorers alike was to the north. This preferred route entailed following the west coast of Greenland north almost to Smith Sound and then crossing to the west in a relatively ice-free “North Water.” As an alternative to this, the middle passage was more direct, yet more often blocked by huge fields of ice, which could become packed together, often trapping ships for weeks or even months.³⁷

The *Advance* and *Rescue* sailed north, with the Greenland coast to the east and the pack ice to the west. Soon after passing the Danish settlement, Uppernavik, at around 73° northern latitude they saw to the west a vast expanse of ice-free water. They were still in the region of the middle passage, yet the temptation of open water as far as they could see was strong. On July 7, over Kane’s respectful objections, Lieutenant DeHaven chose to try the middle passage. By the next day they were fast in the Middle Ice of Baffin Bay and

³⁵Carter, “Journal,” 21.

³⁶Elder, *Biography*, 151.

³⁷Kane, *U.S. Grinnell Expedition*, 50-51.

would remain trapped, vainly trying to cut their way out, until finally being released by a shift in winds on July 28, still on the eastern side of Baffin Bay.³⁸

Three weeks wasted in the middle of the already short Arctic summer was a great loss. They had not even traveled as far into the Arctic as the typical commercial whaler, yet the end of the short summer was fast approaching. One can tell from letters he sent home shortly after this that Kane, with his desire for personal glory, did not tolerate the delay happily. In these letters he blames DeHaven for not following his advice about the middle pack.³⁹

The *Advance* and *Rescue* sailed north to the "North Water" and finally made the crossing to the west. On August 19, the two American brigs approached the entrance to Lancaster Sound, which would take them west into the Canadian archipelago and the site of the search. Here they sighted two ships of Captain William Penny's squadron, the *Lady Franklin* and the *Sophia*, which had come from Britain in search of Franklin. Soon within Lancaster Sound, they were in contact with more British ships, all on the same mission. These British ships had all been delayed by ice as long as the Americans. Sir John Ross commanded the *Felix*. Three Royal Navy ships, the *Resolute*, *Assistance*, and *Pioneer*, formed the squadron of Captain Horatio Austin. The schooner *Prince Albert* was there also, sent out by Lady Franklin under the command of Captain Charles Forsythe.⁴⁰

All of these searchers, now in almost continuous contact, proceeded west together and finally came to a halt in Barrow strait. Routes to the north, south, and west were all blocked by ice, so there was nowhere to go, but the combined expeditions did find evidence of the lost expedition. On Cape Riley they discovered two cairns and signs of British sledge travel and encampments. The American expedition was at Beechey Island on

³⁸Kane, *U.S. Grinnell Expedition*, 71-72, 100-100; EKK to J.D.L. Kane (Mother), August 21, 1850, EKK Papers; EKK to Thomas L. Kane, August 23, 1850, EKK Papers.

³⁹EKK to Thomas Kane, August 23, 1850, EKK Papers.

⁴⁰Kane, *U.S. Grinnell Expedition*, 151-155; Carter, "Journal," 54-57; Gill and Young, 7.

August 27 when men from one of the British ships made the most important discovery to date - Franklin's winter quarters and the graves of three members of Franklin's crew: W. Brain of the *Erebus* died April 3, 1846. John Torrington of the *Terror* died January 1, 1846, and John Hartnell of the *Erebus* whose grave was undated. Unfortunately there was no other written record left by Franklin at this winter encampment. They had built a large cairn, but for some reason Franklin and his officers had failed to leave a message as was usually done. They had presumably departed this place in a hurry the following spring, when the ice had broken up, and neglected to leave the customary record.⁴¹

This discovery indicated that Franklin and most of his crew had survived their first winter in the Arctic, but the question yet remained where they had gone once spring arrived. They could have gone north up Wellington Channel, west to Melville Sound, or south toward King William Land. Each of these routes was thought to possibly lead to the Northwest Passage. Kane was convinced that they had gone north, but unfortunately there was no way to prove any of the theories, since all routes were equally clogged by ice.⁴²

The Americans and British spent their time looking for clues, hunting the occasional polar bear, and getting to know one another. Since all the ships were quite close together most of the time, they had plenty of opportunity to visit ship to ship. Kane was particularly impressed by Sir John Ross. Ross was seventy-three years old in 1850 and had been engaged in Arctic exploration for over thirty years. He had commanded the British expedition of 1818 and had been the first to explore much of Baffin's Bay. Unfortunately, at that time, he mistakenly thought that Lancaster Sound was only a bay and had failed to explore deeply into it. His lieutenants disagreed and on later expeditions proved their former captain wrong, seriously hurting John Ross's career. Many years later Ross set a record by surviving for four winters in the Arctic when his ships were beset. When his friend Sir John Franklin had not returned to England by 1847, Ross had been the first to

⁴¹Kane, *U.S. Grinnell Expedition*, 155-168; Carter, *Journal*, 59-63.

⁴²Kane, *U.S. Grinnell Expedition*, 164-169.

urge the Admiralty to send out rescue missions, but his initial offers to lead such an expedition had been spurned. Finally he had arranged an expedition of his own.⁴³

Kane made many other acquaintances among the British officers, and even became reacquainted with a Lieutenant Brown, whom he said he had last met "among the tropical jungles of Luzon."⁴⁴ Kane presents a picture of gallant camaraderie among the searchers from each nation, yet there was also an undercurrent of competition between them. The Americans, in their cold and often wet little brigs, were somewhat envious of the larger and warmer British ships and the better British equipment. Both Kane and Carter also jealously asserted the American share in the discoveries made on Beechey Island and occasionally alluded to self-interested glory seeking, especially by Captain Ommanney of the *Assistance*, Austin's second in command.⁴⁵

When he was not looking for clues to Franklin's fate or socializing with the British officers, Kane spent most of his time in scientific observation. From the start of the expedition, he had taken every opportunity to observe, collect, and catalogue the local flora and fauna. On entering Baffin Bay he observed the marine life, and when they first made port in Greenland he took the opportunity to "botanize."⁴⁶ His observations of the local plant and animal life continued throughout the trip. He was often joined by Benjamin Vreeland, the *Rescue's* surgeon. Vreeland, conforming, like Kane, to the model of the naval surgeon/naturalist, was also very interested in science. His particular field was ornithology, and he spent much of his time shooting and stuffing birds. Most of the other officers seem to have been happy to assist in the shooting part (and the eating), and the

⁴³Ernest S. Dodge, *The Polar Rosses; John and James Clark Ross and their Explorations*, (New York: Barnes & Noble Books, 1973), 43-93, 222-240.

⁴⁴Kane, *U. S. Grinnell Expedition*, 171.

⁴⁵Kane, *U.S. Grinnell Expedition*, 170-176; Carter, *Journal*, 59-72.

⁴⁶Kane, *U.S. Grinnell Expedition*, 32, 39, 145-146, passim; EKK to "Bessie" Kane, n.d. (circa August 1850), EKK Papers.

expedition did its part to decimate the local bird population, even killing one of the last surviving Great Auks, if Carter's identification is correct.⁴⁷

Kane observed and recorded the nature of Arctic geology, which was his favorite field, made maps of ocean currents in Baffin Bay, kept meteorological records, and pondered the processes of iceberg and glacial formation.⁴⁸ When discussing these topics in his narrative, he regularly demonstrated his familiarity with scholarly authorities in all these fields and reflected on a variety of established theories.

Every aspect of Arctic science came under his gaze, including Arctic ethnology, when the expedition had brief encounters with the Inuit. Kane was interested in kayaks and native hunting techniques, but he was generally disgusted with the people themselves. As in his earlier contacts with people from other cultures, he mixed curiosity with contempt. In mid-August he met some "genuine, unmitigated Esquimaux" near Smith Sound, as opposed to the "adulterated breeds of the Danish settlement." He observed that "these poor animals were as fat as the bears which we killed a few days ago."⁴⁹ Ironically, a few years later, these "poor animals" would keep him from starving to death on his second trip to the Arctic.

As winter approached, and it became clear that no more discoveries were going to be made that season, DeHaven decided that the wisest course would be to return home for the winter and resume the search in the spring. The expedition attempted to do so, yet after little more than a day sailing back to the east, the two brigs became trapped in the pack ice in Barrow Strait. Helpless in the face of the power of miles of thick, slowly drifting pack ice, and alone now that they had left their British friends, they drifted first north into Wellington Channel, where they were able to map some new territory not known to have been visited before by explorers, and then east with the ice as it slowly moved towards

⁴⁷Carter, *Journal*, 23, 24, 28, 52, 53, *passim*.

⁴⁸Kane, *U.S. Grinnell Expedition*, 30, 32-34, 48, 137, *passim*.

⁴⁹*Ibid.*, 37-40, 132-133.

Baffin Bay and the Atlantic. They stayed in this helpless position, with nothing to do but wait and hope that the brigs would not be crushed, from September until early the following June.

For the expedition, these were nine months of both terror and boredom. Surrounded by huge expanses of constantly shifting ice, they were in perpetual danger of being crushed. At times they slept in their clothes with packs full of provisions ready in case they had to abandon the ships on short notice. Yet they eventually became numbed to the continual fear and found ways to occupy themselves through the long darkness of winter. They entertained themselves in a variety of ways, including lecturing to each other on their own particular areas of knowledge, publishing a newspaper, and putting on a play.

Kane continued to spend much of his time in scientific observation. Both Kane and Dr. Vreeland were interested in making regular and precise astronomical observations, which could at times annoy other officers less interested in science. In the middle of October, Robert Carter complained of the work involved in collecting astronomical data for Humboldtian scientists:

Star shooting or observing is a very cold and troubles[ome] sport, embittering the extremities of Arctic cruisers, especially on cold windy nights, sometimes resorted to by those unfortunate men...to swell the pages of a narrative or as in our case for the amusement of old asses who sit at home in comfort wondering why we didn't make ten thousand other observations with which they might gull the people in their meteorological tables and other scientific works on Arctic and other spots rarely visited by men and never without falsifying all their far fetched theories about winds, currents, tides, temperature &c. About equal to our doctors who having by some means obtained twice as much clothing as any of us, that they may be enabled to go or stay below whenever they please, criticize the logs, and dont hesitate to say that they are useless, not correct because the hourly observations on temperature, Barometer &c are not taken always at the minute appointed.⁵⁰

Spring eventually came and released the ships without serious damage, but by this time the crew's health was poor. Many, especially the captain, had been affected by scurvy. They obtained fresh food at the Greenland settlements, and then DeHaven tried to

⁵⁰Carter, *Journal*, 89-90.

return the ships to Lancaster Sound to resume the search, but the ice in Baffin Bay prevented them and they returned to New York. The *Advance* arrived home on September 30, 1851 and the slower *Rescue* soon followed.

* * *

When described in such straight-forward terms, the first Grinnell expedition hardly seems worthy of great attention. Little had been accomplished which would not have been without the American participation. No great discoveries had been revealed, nor had any great sacrifices been made. But this view does not take into account the aura of mystery, fantasy, and sublime wonder that surrounded popular nineteenth-century conceptions of the Arctic regions. The Arctic was one of the strangest places on Earth with its severe temperatures, mysterious optical phenomena, and perpetual night in winter and perpetual day in summer. It was truly the greatest of all geographic mysteries, where the fantastic was real and where science entered the realm of fantasy. It inspired as much grand and fantastic speculation as the Moon or planet Mars would in later years or that other galaxies do today. Elisha Kane would make the most of these themes when recounting his experiences on the First Grinnell Expedition, yet he would also contain them within a framework of Humboldtian inquiry.

Just like the popular interest in sciences and pseudo-sciences of the mind, elements of wondrous fantasy mixed with reasoned scientific theory from the beginning of the Grinnell Expedition. When Lieutenant DeHaven received his sailing orders for the expedition they specified, "having passed Barrow Strait, you will turn your attention northward to Wellington Channel, and westward to Cape Walker."⁵¹ This seems peculiar since Franklin's instructions from the Admiralty had been to proceed southwest, not north, after passing Barrow Strait.

⁵¹William Ballard Preston to Edwin DeHaven, May 15, 1850, printed in *Littell's Living Age*, 26(1850), 45, and many other contemporary newspapers and periodicals.

The Navy ordered the expedition to turn north because of a popular geographical theory of a mild Open Polar Sea or “Polynia” surrounding the North Pole. Many scientists believed that the coldest region of the globe lay at around 70° to 80° north latitude, so that if a ship forced its way north through a barrier of ice in this region, it would emerge into a warmer open sea that supported abundant plant and animal life. Some hypothesized that Franklin had made his way into this sea, but had been trapped, and was living there still.⁵²

The theory of an Open Polar Sea mixed scientific reasoning with romantic fantasy. Many of the organizers and members of the Grinnell expedition, including Kane, believed the theory, but it did not originate with them. Various beliefs that there was a large body of open water at the North Pole had been discussed in geographic circles since the sixteenth century, but, not surprisingly, every explorer who sought to go there had been thwarted by ice.⁵³ In England, Second Secretary of the Admiralty, John Barrow, championed the Open Polar Sea theory, while in nineteenth-century America the most influential proponent of the theory was the oceanographer (and Humboldtian) Lieutenant Matthew Fontaine Maury, head of the Naval Observatory and Hydrography Office. Because of Maury’s influence, a search for this mythical sea became a part of the orders given to Lieutenant DeHaven, who had formerly served under Maury at the Naval Observatory.⁵⁴

A variety of evidence contributed to the Open Polar Sea theory. Explorers had noticed that areas covered by ice one year would be open the next, and regions far to the north were sometimes observed to be free of ice. They had also observed animals migrating to the north in far northern regions. Some theorized that the warm currents of the Gulf Stream eventually found their way to the North Pole, or that ice could not form far

⁵²This theory is laid out in Matthew Fontaine Maury, *The Physical Geography of the Sea*, (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1857); Kane, “Access to Open Polar Sea,” in *The U.S. Grinnell Expedition*, 543-552; John Kirkland Wright, *Human Nature in Geography*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1966), 89-118.

⁵³Wright, “Human Nature,” 89-118.

⁵⁴The orders mention Maury by name. *Littell’s Living Age*, 26(1850), 45.

from land, or that the continual sunshine of an Arctic summer would melt all ice. Maury supported the theory that the Earth was flatter at the Poles, so that they were closer to the internal heat of the Earth's core, as well as the theory that heat was produced at the North Pole due to the friction of colliding ocean currents.⁵⁵

While it is easy to heap scorn upon these disproven theories with the benefit of hindsight and satellite imagery, some theories about open water at the Poles were well reasoned and plausible, though mistaken. Maury was an accomplished scientist, not a crank, and he is today considered one of the founders of modern oceanography. But theories of an Open Polar Sea, like theories about the workings of the mind, had great imaginative potential that quickly moved beyond scientists like Maury. For example, the Open Polar Sea theory was used symbolically by a number of nineteenth-century writers of fiction. Mary Shelley began *Frankenstein* with an Arctic explorer who was obsessed with sailing to the North Pole, just as Frankenstein was obsessed with creating his monster. Edgar Allan Poe describes variations on the Open Polar Sea theory in his short novel, "The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym," and two of his short stories, "Manuscript Found in a Bottle," and "Hans Pfaal." Later in the century writers as diverse as Jules Verne and Sarah Orne Jewett would make use of the theory in their fiction.⁵⁶ Whatever the scientific merit of theories about the Poles, their imaginative potential made them subject to popular American curiosity.

⁵⁵Wright, "Human Nature," 102, 104.

⁵⁶Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein: Or the Modern Prometheus*, (New York: Penguin Books, 1992 [1818]), 13; Edgar Allan Poe, "Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym," *The Fall of the House of Usher and Other Tales*, (New York: Signet Classic, 1980), 200-373; Edgar Allan Poe, "Manuscript Found in a Bottle," "Hans Pfaal," *The Short Fiction of Edgar Allan Poe*, (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1990), 558-588, 623-629; Jules Verne, *The Adventures of Captain Hatteras*, (Westport, CT: Associated Booksellers, 1961); Sarah Orne Jewett, *The Land of the Pointed Firs and Other Stories*, Sarah Way Sherman ed., (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 1997 [1896]), 20-30.

Other nineteenth-century speculation about the Poles clearly departed the realm of rational science and entered that of fantasy and even mysticism. Such theories did not directly influence the organizers of the Grinnell expedition, but they did influence popular interest in the expedition. One such theory was that of "Symmes Hole." In 1818 John Cleves Symmes Jr. declared to the world his belief that "the Earth is hollow and habitable within: containing a number of solid concentric spheres, one within the other, and that it is open at the poles twelve or sixteen degrees."⁵⁷ This idea was widely disseminated, if not believed, and versions of it were picked up by the earliest writers of science fiction such as Edgar Allan Poe in the United States and Jules Verne in France.⁵⁸

The "Symmes Hole" theory was not accepted by Kane nor any member of the Grinnell Expedition, but it does serve to show that on a popular level the Poles were a realm of mystery and fantasy (and perhaps Santa Claus?), and remained among those things still unobserved and thus unexplained by science. As unexplained mysteries, the Poles became the subject of speculation of many sorts. Poe used both the Open Polar Sea theory, the Symmes Hole theory, and ambiguous, sometimes mystical, combinations of the two in his stories. Even in our own day, popularizers of the "unexplained" sometimes place the lost continent of Atlantis at the South Pole. Interestingly, historian William Stanton has shown a continuous series of links between Symmes' theory and the motivating force behind the United States Exploring Expedition of the years 1838-1842, the first major government-sponsored American exploring expedition and part of mainstream scientific exploration. These links can be extended to the Grinnell Expedition through Lieutenant Edwin J. DeHaven, commander of one of the ships of the U.S.

⁵⁷John Cleves Symmes Jr., quoted in William Stanton, *The Great United States Exploring Expedition of 1838-1842*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1975), 8.

⁵⁸See Poe's stories "Hans Pfaal," "MS found in a Bottle," and "The Narrative of A. Gordon Pym," and Verne, *Captain Hatteras*, and Jules Verne, *Journey to the Centre of the Earth*, William Butcher trans., (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992 [1864]).

Exploring Expedition.⁵⁹ Furthermore, a number of newspaper reports linked the Open Polar Sea theory, the theory of Symmes Hole, and the search for Franklin, showing that, on a popular level, the lines between science and fantasy were thin. A story on the front page of *The Evening Post* discussed the recently departed Grinnell Expedition, Matthew Maury's theories, and Symmes Hole: "Polina, that northern world, unvisited hitherto, except by 'beast and fowl,' be it open sea or terra-firma, or, as Capt Symmes believed, the open passage to another concentric world within the earth, will become an object of public solicitude scarcely inferior to Sir John himself."⁶⁰ On the expedition's return Symmes's son even wrote to Kane asking for information relating to his father's theory.⁶¹

Speculation about the North Pole and the fate of Franklin also attracted mystics and the proponents of many of the new pseudo-sciences of the mind. On May 22, 1850, in an article that appeared next to one on the recently departed Grinnell Expedition, the *New York Herald* reported that a friend of the mystic Andrew Jackson Davis, who would become a leading figure in the spiritualist movement, was claiming to have "passed from the Earth, through the opening at one of the poles" and in this way traveled to other planets.⁶² The fate of the Franklin expedition also became a favorite topic of clairvoyants who would "travel" with their minds to the Arctic regions and hold conversations with the lost explorers and report back on their whereabouts.⁶³ Even the fledgling spirit rapping movement had something to say about the search for Franklin. For example, a rapper in Cortland County, New York knocked out the message that the Franklin Expedition had

⁵⁹William Stanton, *The Great United States Exploring Expedition of 1838-1842*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1975), 8-40.

⁶⁰*The Evening Post*, June 4, 1850; *New York Tribune*, November 21, 1851; *New York Daily Times*, October 11, 1851; *Daily Times (Cincinnati)*, October 18, 1851; *Cleveland Daily Plain Dealer*, October 21, 1851.

⁶¹John C. Symmes to EKK, October 20, 1851, EKK Papers.

⁶²*The New York Herald*, May 22, 1850.

⁶³Alison Winter, *Mesmerized; Powers of Mind in Victorian Britain*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 122-125; *Daily Albany Argus*, April 17, 1850.

completed the Northwest Passage after much hardship, but had then stopped in Japan for supplies, where it was attacked and its members taken prisoner.⁶⁴

What this shows is not that believers in the Open Polar Sea theory were bad scientists, but that, at this time, there was no clear line between popular, scientific, and even fictional and fantastic theories and beliefs about the North Pole. The North Pole, like death, was a mystery, subject to speculation and investigation, but as yet no direct observation. The Americans who picked up the newspaper and read a story about Polar exploration and the Grinnell Expedition, or who later read Kane's narrative, might also be exposed to all sorts of more fantastic accounts. The popularity of the Grinnell Expedition stemmed not only from its humanitarian and scientific appeal, but also from its appeal to popular romantic fantasies about the wonder and mystery of the North Pole.

* * *

When the Grinnell expedition returned home, Commander DeHaven declined the privilege, as leader of the expedition, of writing anything more than his official report to the Navy on the meager results of the trip. Kane however had other ideas. He became the expedition's historian, writing a personal narrative of the journey that appealed to public interests in travel, adventure, and the heroic pursuit of science, as well as the public curiosity about the Arctic. Kane's book is a textual panorama of the Arctic landscape. Since most of the trip was spent trapped in the ice with little action worth describing, Kane dwelt in minute detail on every aspect of the strange land the expedition passed through.

The United States Grinnell Expedition in Search of Sir John Franklin: A Personal Narrative is a multifaceted book. On its surface it is a narrative of the expedition, but more importantly it is a work of popular Humboldtian science. Most of the text is taken up with detailed descriptions of a variety of physical phenomena. Geology, oceanography, botany, zoology, astronomy, glaciology, geomagnetism, meteorology and hydrography all come

⁶⁴*Troy Daily Whig*, May 16, 1850; *Albany Daily State Register*, May 16, 1850.

under Kane's consideration, with brief interludes to hunt polar bears or look for relics of Franklin's voyage. Lengthy appendices contain meteorological tables giving daily entries from the log book on latitude, longitude, direction of ocean currents and wind, air and water temperature, barometric pressure and weather.⁶⁵

Mixed with this science is a strong dose of the strange and exotic. The overarching theme of the book is a tension and interplay between wonder and science. Kane capitalized on public perceptions of the Arctic as a world of wonders. He describes Polar bears, perpetual light and dark, icebergs and the northern lights. These seem to defy the laws of nature or belong to another world. At times he seems to be describing something from a fairy tale. Yet in the end he always explains these things rationally, or, if he cannot fully explain them, he subjects them to rational inquiry, thus containing the wonder and the mystery within the bounds of human understanding.

The best example of this is his discussion of refraction. In the Arctic, visual perceptions are often severely distorted because of reflections between large fields of ice and ice crystals in the atmosphere. Objects that are far away often appear to be close, and it is even possible for objects below the horizon to be reflected above the horizon. Some of Kane's most picturesque language is reserved for his descriptions of refraction. Describing the effects of this phenomenon early in the trip, he observes, "No effort of the imagination was necessary for me to travel from the true watery horizon to the false one of refraction above it, and there to see huge structures lining an aerial ocean-margin. Some rusty, Egyptian, rubbish-clogged propyla, and hypaethral courts - some tapering and columnar, like Palmyra and Baalbec - some with architrave and portico, like Telmessus or Athens, or else vague and grotto-like, such as dreamy memories recalled of Ellora and Carli."⁶⁶ His

⁶⁵These tables were prepared by Charles Schott of the Coast Survey. Schott proved Carter's criticism of armchair Humboldtians by complaining with Kane of the quality of the meteorological data collected by the first Grinnell Expedition; Charles A. Schott to EKK, November 29, 1852; EKK to Charles A. Schott, May 8, 1852, EKK Papers.

⁶⁶Kane, *U.S. Grinnell Expedition*, 67.

description of fantasies seen in the sky is juxtaposed with his scientific consideration of refraction, which takes into account the theories of Professors Agassiz and Vince.

“Professor Agassiz has described a similar class of repeated images upon Lake Superior, limited, however, to two - one inverted, and above that the same erect. He suggests that it may be simply the reflection of the landscape inverted upon the surface of the lake, and reproduced with the actual landscape.”⁶⁷

Kane was aware of this tension between science and wonder and managed to balance the two. A phenomenon like refraction, that seemed to deny the scientist the use of his ordinary senses, was particularly appropriate for this. While Kane often used scientific instruments and scientific language, he also commented on their inadequacy. “Voyagers speak of the effect of Arctic refraction in language as exact and mathematical as their own correction tables. It almost seems as if their minute observations of dip-sectors and repeating-circles had left them no scope for picturesque sublimity.”⁶⁸ Kane, on the other hand, had room for both dip-sectors and sublimity and presented both to his readers.

Kane’s descriptions of the Arctic in *The U.S. Grinnell Expedition* show that an emotional sense of wonder is not in opposition to science. Rather wonder provides a context for science, especially the Humboldtian variety of science. The unexplained marvel is fascinating to Kane. He continually seeks out “picturesque sublimity” so that he can marvel at it, and then explain it using reason. For Kane this becomes the ultimate justification for a scientific approach to knowledge, and the science itself is elevated by the grandeur of that which it explains. This approach was made popular by Humboldt, but Kane was easily able to adapt it to the Arctic landscape and the search for Franklin.

* * *

When antebellum Americans picked up Kane’s first book, they saw new parts of the Earth revealed to their understanding, they gazed at engravings of sublime landscapes.

⁶⁷Ibid., 66.

⁶⁸Ibid., 67.

and they read Kane's explanations of the natural mechanisms which caused these wonders. It is impossible to know exactly what they experienced as they read, but perhaps they felt pride that American perseverance and sacrifice could lead to such wonderful discoveries, and that in the future ever greater discoveries would be made, leading ultimately to the inevitable advancement of mankind. Kane's first book ended with a call for these greater discoveries. He laid out the scientific arguments developed by Maury in favor of an Open Polar Sea, and skillfully melded them with the humanitarian effort to find Franklin. He announced his plan to return to the Arctic at the head of another expedition to find both Franklin and the open sea. In the *Advance* they will sail as far north as possible, then set out across the ice with sledges and portable gutta percha boats as far as the mythic sea. "Once there, if such a reward awaits us, we launch our little boats, and, bidding God speed us, embark upon its waters."⁶⁹

⁶⁹Ibid., 552.

CHAPTER FOUR

THE SPIRIT OF INQUIRY IN NEW YORK CITY

Soon after the Grinnell Expedition sailed off for the Arctic regions in the late spring of 1850, some of New York City's most accomplished literary men gathered at the Broadway home of the Baptist minister, journalist, and editor, Rufus Griswold, for an evening of spiritual investigation. They had come to meet "The Rochester ladies," whom the New York City newspapers had been discussing on a regular basis ever since hearing of their demonstration of the rappings in Rochester's Corinthian Hall. Maggie and Kate Fox and Leah Fish, with Mrs. Fox, Eliab W. Capron, and Calvin Brown, had recently arrived in New York city, and were staying at Barnum's Hotel, where they invited visitors to come to investigate spiritual communication for a dollar per person.¹ They also arranged to give this special private demonstration for an influential audience at Griswold's house.

Dr. Griswold's guest list for this "Post-Mortuum Soiree," as it was called by one of the guests, the writer Nathaniel P. Willis, was a veritable who's who of New York City's literary elite. It included, among others, the acclaimed writers James Fenimore Cooper, William Cullen Bryant, and Henry Tuckerman; historians George Bancroft and Rev. Francis Hawks; physician Dr. John W. Francis, and newspaper editors John Bigelow and George Ripley.² This bevy of literary fame and distinction represented a cross section of social and political views. The group included Democrats as well as Whigs, conservatives as well as radicals. According to George Ripley, the literary editor of the *Tribune*, "several

¹Despite frequent misstatements to the contrary, Barnum's Hotel and the Fox sisters were connected with neither P.T. Barnum nor his American Museum.

²The evening was reported on by George Ripley in the *New York Tribune*, June 8, 1850 and by Nathaniel P. Willis in *The Home Journal*, June 15, 1850; Biographical sketches of all of these literary guests can be found in *The Dictionary of American Biography*.

gentlemen were invited who had been known to express the most entire skepticism with regard to the extraordinary nature of the sounds, believing them to be the result of contrivance and imposture." Others, like the radical Ripley himself, a founder of the transcendental community, Brook Farm, were probably predisposed to give the rappings an open-minded hearing. Clearly this was going to be an important performance for the sisters. To convince even one of these men, "whose general character for intelligence and probity, was a guarantee against their being deluded by hasty impressions," would be a significant accomplishment.³

As the demonstration commenced that night at Griswold's home, no sounds were heard for over half an hour, but soon, as the company drew closer around the table into a "compact circle," they heard faint sounds from under the table, which soon increased in volume. Fish asked the spirits to communicate, and the knockings responded that they would answer questions put by Dr. Marcy. Dr. Marcy's investigation, and those of the other guests at Griswold's home that evening, followed a format the sisters had developed over the past months. The questioner silently thought of a dead person with whom he wished to communicate. He then asked the spirits questions, either mentally or aloud. Usually the spirits knocked for "yes" or remained silent for "no" as alternatives were spoken aloud by the questioner or pointed to on a piece of paper with a pencil. At other times the spirits would call for the alphabet and spell out the answers. Dr. Marcy "inquired whether the spirit which he wished to converse with was a relation - was a child - and what was his age at the time of its death." The spirits responded correctly with knocks to these questions, according to Marcy, but "nothing worthy of special notice was elicited."⁴

Next, questions were put by Henry Tuckerman, a well known literary critic, essayist, and poet. Tuckerman thought of a dead person with whom he wished to communicate, but did not say the name aloud. He then began to ask test questions of the

³*New York Tribune*, June 8, 1850.

⁴*New York Tribune*, June 8, 1850.

spirits. "Did he live in New York?" he asked, but no answer came. "In Baltimore? In Cambridge? In Boston?" At the name of this last city three raps responded indicating he lived in Boston. "Mr. T. continued, 'Was he a lawyer? A merchant? A physician? A clergyman?' Knocks. 'Was he an Episcopalian? A Presbyterian? A Unitarian?' - going over the names of the principle sects. No answer. At the suggestion of a gentleman, Mr. T. asked, 'Was he a Christian?' Knocks." Tuckerman then asked about the person's age at death by naming increments of ten and was answered at sixty. "'Has he left a family?' Knocks. 'Children?' Knocks. 'Five? Three? Two?' Knocks. 'Did he die in Boston? In Philadelphia? In Albany? In Northampton? In Bennington?' Knocks. 'Did he die of consumption? Of fever? Of cholera? Of old age?' Knocks." At the end of this questioning Tuckerman revealed that he had been thinking of William Ellery Channing, the Unitarian minister from Boston who had died in Bennington, Vermont in 1842 at age sixty-two. While Channing was well known as a Unitarian, according to Ripley, who recounted the story in the *Tribune*, he preferred simply to be called a Christian.⁵

The sisters had an unsuccessful session with Dr. Francis Hawks and then correctly identified the poet, Robert Burns for Dr. Francis, but their greatest success came when they were questioned by novelist, James Fenimore Cooper. According to N.P. Willis, "for no one, were the spirits half so willing to repeat their revelations twice over, or half so explicit."⁶ Cooper thought silently of his sister, who had been tragically killed by a fall from a horse fifty years before. He asked a series of questions about his unidentified subject which were all answered correctly by the raps.⁷ Leah Fish would later claim Cooper as a convert, saying that on his death-bed little more than a year later, he wrote, "Tell the Fox family I bless them. I have been made happy through them. They have prepared me for this hour."⁸ There is, however, no independent confirmation of this

⁵*New York Tribune*, June 8, 1850.

⁶*The Home Journal*, June 15, 1850.

⁷*New York Tribune*, June 8, 1850.

⁸Leah Underhill, *The Missing Link*, 141.

dubious claim. The only verifiable mention Cooper made of the evening was in a letter to his wife in which he says, "I am deep in the Rochester Knockings, which are making a great deal of noise, just now," suggesting that his curiosity had been aroused, but not exactly the ringing endorsement of a convert.⁹ It is fairly typical of the effect the Fox sisters had on the citizens of New York: they aroused curiosity and interest in many more than they convinced to believe in spirits. Of course they were always ready to claim as converts anyone who showed interest in the mysterious sounds, especially if they were well known.

The guest list for this "Post Mortuum Soiree" had clearly been made with an eye towards generating the greatest possible publicity for the spirit-rapping in New York City and national periodicals. George Ripley was the prominent literary editor of Horace Greeley's *Tribune*. William Cullen Bryant and John Bigelow were co-editors of *The Evening Post*, and N.P. Willis was the editor of *The Home Journal*, a New York weekly. Others were well known writers whose essays often appeared in print. This group was well-positioned to spread the word about the rappings and turn the sisters into big-city celebrities. They could tap directly into a growing American mass culture. This is exactly what happened.

On June 8 *The New York Tribune* printed a two-column article by Ripley recounting the evening at Griswold's, and a week later Willis printed an even longer story in *The Home Journal*. Neither of these pieces endorsed the rappings. Rather, they told a mysterious story and left it up to their readers to decide. Ripley ended his article by "recommending our readers to see for themselves," while Willis ended his by stating that "there is no end to the speculation on the subject, and we leave it with our readers."¹⁰ Although not endorsing the spiritual origin of the mysterious sounds, these accounts clearly

⁹James Fenimore Cooper to Mrs. Cooper, June 9, 1850, *The Letters and Journals of James Fenimore Cooper*, IV, James Franklin Beard eds., (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1968), 193.

¹⁰*New York Tribune*, June 8, 1850; *The Home Journal*, June 15, 1850.

encouraged further speculation and interest and insured that a flood of curious New Yorkers would visit Barnum's Hotel, pay their dollars, and hear the knocks for themselves.

To some, Ripley's and Willis's accounts read like endorsements, because they did not condemn the raps as fraud. An unidentified guest at Griswold's that night, unhappy about seeing his name in the *Tribune*, wrote to the more reserved *Evening Post*, whose editors, William Cullen Bryant and John Bigelow, had declined to publicize the evening. He made clear that none of the distinguished gentlemen present "to my knowledge, recognizes any supernatural agency in the affair."¹¹ His opinion was that the whole thing was being blown out of proportion and that the distinguished names of the gentlemen present at Griswold's were being used to lend respectability to foolishness. He was right in part, but this writer did not understand what Leah Fish, E.W. Capron, and the Fox sisters clearly did. As long as the rapping could get publicity, and as long as no overwhelming evidence showed them to be fraudulent, public interest would only increase.

* * *

The Fox sisters' extraordinary journey from rural anonymity in western New York state to the fashionable parlors of Manhattan was made possible by an ever-increasing discussion and debate about the "Mysterious Knockings" which had begun over six months before the "Post-Mortuum Soiree" at Griswold's. This debate was initiated when Eliab W. Capron and George Willets wrote to the *New York Tribune* about the Corinthian Hall demonstration in Rochester. On November 29, 1849 the *Tribune* devoted over a full column to a letter in which Capron and Willets claimed that the evening had been a total success for the rappings, suggested that they might signal "the commencement of a new era of spiritual influx into the world," and called for further investigation.¹² A week later the *Tribune's* editor, Horace Greeley, wrote an editorial which appeared on the *Tribune's* front

¹¹*The Evening Post* (New York), June 15, 1850.

¹²*The New York Tribune*, November 29, 1849.

page. Responding to a letter he had received from a reader, he laid out his own opinions on the matter and endorsed open-minded investigation. "We cannot regard with any other feeling than respect that natural instinct of the heart, which in one way or another affirms a world of spiritual existences at no impassable remove from our natural life: and we have little sympathy with such unscientific presumptions as passes the verdict of 'humbug' upon every fact it does not understand." He went on to link the rappings with mesmerism and clairvoyance as worthy areas of intelligent investigation and offered to publish "all new facts that may be supposed to have a bearing on the subject." But he also expressed some serious reservations, pointing out that the substance of the rappings, even if genuine, did not amount to much. "It is difficult to understand why spirits, who act with as little reason as children or idiots, should be treated with any more considerations."¹³

Greeley had invited a dialogue about the mysterious rappings, and that is what he got. Throughout the winter and spring, leading up to the sisters' visit to Manhattan, letters, articles, and editorials about spirit-rapping became regular features in the *Tribune* and other New York papers like the *Sun* and *Express*. Two books on the history of the raps also went on sale, one written by Eliab Capron and Henry Barron and the other by a respected Rochester publisher, D. M. Dewey. With this influx of information about the knockings in western New York, speculation of all sorts abounded. Some declared it all a fraud, while others speculated that the raps might signal the dawning of a new age. But one thing was clear; for New Yorkers to truly make up their minds about this strange phenomenon they would have to witness it for themselves.

Back in Rochester, in the months after the demonstration at Corinthian Hall, the small group that surrounded the sisters became increasingly aware of the growing interest in the mysterious noises outside of their own community. Amy and Isaac Post began to receive letters from people they had never met asking about the raps. For instance, Valentine Nicholson, a friend-of-a-friend of the Posts, wrote from Ohio asking the Posts to

¹³*The New York Tribune*, December 5, 1849.

ask the spirits for advice. He wanted to know if he should buy his mother-in-law's farm, if he should continue to live near neighbors he did not like, and whether he should remain a farmer or take up the tinner's trade. He felt that the spirits would be able to give him the correct answers.¹⁴ As further evidence of the growing interest, in April Isaac Post's business partner, Edmund Willis, visited New York City on business and found that he was constantly accosted with questions about the raps by those who had seen his partner's name in the newspaper.¹⁵

At this point Eliab Capron once again emerged as the chief publicist for the raps. As the dialogue in the New York papers increased, and as word of the rappings spread throughout the country, Capron began to push for a visit by Kate and Maggie to New York City. Apparently Mrs. Fox was somewhat hesitant to send her two young daughters off to the big city, and despite Capron's appeals, in early February she decided not to allow it.¹⁶ Capron, however, did not take no for an answer. He wrote to Mrs. Fox telling her that "the persons who have sent for her [Kate] from there [New York City] stand among the first in the nation for science and influence. It would be of great advantage to your family to have such men satisfied in regard to the family, and it would forever clear all who are now being ridiculed and lied about from all charges of fraud."¹⁷ Capron was corresponding with a number of men in New York, including Andrew Jackson Davis, the famed mystic, and the phrenologist, Fowler, about a possible visit by the "Rochester Knockers." Another correspondent who, Capron told Mrs. Fox, "wishes his name kept a secret for the present," may have been Rufus Griswold or perhaps even Horace Greeley.¹⁸

¹⁴Valentine Nicholson to Amy and Isaac Post, December 16, 1949, Amy and Isaac Post Family Papers, Department of Rare Books and Special Collections, University of Rochester Library.

¹⁵Edmund P. Willis to Isaac Post, April 26, 1850, Post Papers.

¹⁶Why Mr. Fox was not involved in this decision is unclear and for this time period seems very odd. After the initial rappings in Hydesville John D. Fox recedes into the background and remains in Acadia Township, while his wife and daughters constantly move about the country.

¹⁷Eliab W. Capron to Margaret Rutan Fox, February 10, 1850, Post Papers.

¹⁸Barbara Goldsmith, in a recent biography of Victoria Woodhull, has made the claim that Greeley made a trip to Rochester in August 1849 to see the sisters and "fetch Kate Fox." It is unclear where she got this

Capron had set himself up in the position of the Fox family's agent, publicist, and defender, and he seemed particularly interested in taking Kate to the city. In his letter to Mrs. Fox, the reputation of the Fox family and the importance of spreading the word about the manifestations seemed to be foremost in his thoughts. But he had also committed himself rather strongly to the raps in a public letter to a major nationwide publication, and in his recent book on the rappings, so his own reputation was at stake now as well. "Seriously," he told her. "I do think it would end in great advantage to all of us for us to go. They offer no pay except to pay our expenses but there are always persons who will make presents to girls - besides money is not always the greatest advantage to be gained by a good-deal."¹⁹ Of course money eventually did emerge as a powerful motive when, four months later, they were charging a dollar a head to curious New Yorkers at Barnum's Hotel.

* * *

From November 1849 to April 1850, while debate about the knocks raged in the New York City papers, Maggie and her sisters remained in the vicinity of Rochester and Auburn, giving seances to local citizens and to interested men and women who traveled to Rochester to see them. Leah Fish was most likely enjoying the status the rappings gave her. She had moved from a marginal existence as a single mother giving piano lessons, to a new role as the focus of the attention of successful middle-class men and women. Kate and Maggie Fox, on the other hand, were still very young. To them the rappings were more a matter of fun than an issue of status or money, and they seem to have enjoyed playing mischievous tricks on those who came to seances. From their perspective it must have all been a delightful game. As spirits they could behave in ways impossible in their

information as none of the sources she listed in her endnotes say anything of the sort. Kate did, however, stay with the Greeleys for a time in the late summer and fall of 1850. Barbara Goldsmith, *Other Powers: The Age of Suffrage, Spiritualism, and the Scandalous Victoria Woodhull*, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1998), 55.

¹⁹Eliab W. Capron to Margaret Rutan Fox, February 10, 1850, Post Papers.

ordinary roles. They could knock adults on the head and tell them absurd things and then blame it all on playful spirits from another world. As a result of the sisters' tricks, devoted spiritualists became convinced that there were good as well as bad spirits, and that sometimes "bad spirits" lied and played tricks upon the living.²⁰

Unfortunately for Kate and Maggie Fox, as the movement quickly grew, the fun and games must have diminished. The farther they got into it, the less control the girls could exert. Scrutiny only increased, as did the cost of exposure, so soon the girls became trapped in their own game, forced to spend tedious hours as the object of public curiosity and gossip. This is probably when Maggie and Kate began to resent their older sister, who now controlled much of their lives. This resentment bubbled to the surface years later when they renounced spiritualism and blamed the fraud on Fish.²¹

Sporadic reporting at this time mentioned rappings in a variety of locations outside of the sisters' influence. In the home of Reverend Eliakim Phelps in Stratford, Connecticut in March, witnesses heard raps and saw objects thrown through the air in the presence of an eleven year old boy. These spirits seemed to have had more malevolent intentions than those at Rochester. Objects often struck witnesses and caused damage, leading Reverend Phelps to conclude that "wicked spirits" were at work, and that "their communications are wholly worthless," and "devices of Satan."²² Other rappings were heard in Newark, New Jersey, while strange unexplained movement of objects was reported in both Richmond, Virginia and the West Indies.²³ Clearly the sisters' trick was taking on a life of its own.

During this time an independent spiritualist movement emerged, inspired by the raps of the Fox sisters, but dedicated to philosophies that had developed independently of the Rochester knockings. The foundations for this spiritualist movement predated the

²⁰Eliab W. Capron, *Modern Spiritualism*, (New York: Partridge and Brittan, 1855), 183; Reuben B. Davenport, *Death-Blow to Spiritualism*, (New York: G. W. Dillingham, 1888), 121-130.

²¹Davenport, *Death-Blow*, *passim*.

²²*New York Tribune*, June 29, 1850

²³*The Evening Post*, April 30, 1850; *Daily Albany Argus*, May 10, 1850; *New York Tribune*, June 27, 1850.

knockings in Hydesville, but it had enjoyed little national success before the Fox sisters generated publicity. The sisters, however, had little interest in or control over such movements themselves.²⁴ Performance, not philosophy, continued to be their forte. In the midst of discussion and speculation, the Fox sisters began to travel, giving demonstrations of the mysterious knockings. Having originated the raps and the method of communication, they now became the first to turn them into a traveling road-show.

* * *

Capron, with help from Leah Fish, finally won over Mrs. Fox, who granted permission for her daughters to travel. At the direction of the spirits, according to Fish, they first went to Albany and neighboring Troy at the end of April or beginning of May to give public demonstrations at Van Vechten Hall in Albany and Apollo Hall in Troy and private seances at the Delavan House Hotel and the Troy House Hotel. Professor R.P. Ambler accompanied them to Troy and gave lectures on the spiritual communication and spiritualist philosophy. The citizens of Troy, however, were, according to the *Troy Daily Whig*, more interested in the raps than the professor's lecture.²⁵

For the public seances, which Fish called "promiscuous circles," the family charged a dollar per person per hour. The alternative was a private seance for two or more people which cost five dollars. The local citizens willingly paid this sum, for when the editor of the *Troy Daily Whig* went to the Troy House to see the sisters, he found the hotel's parlors full of people waiting to get in ahead of him. He was disappointed at having to be put on a waiting list until the next day.²⁶ From Albany and Troy, the party went on to New York City at the end of May.²⁷

²⁴The best source for these theologically oriented spiritualists is Bret E. Carroll, *Spiritualism in Antebellum America*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997); Ernest Isaacs, "A History of Nineteenth Century American Spiritualism as a Religious and Social Movement," Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Wisconsin, 1975.

²⁵*Troy Daily Whig*, May 1, 1850; Underhill, *The Missing-Link*, 117-122.

²⁶*The Missing Link*, 117-122; There was little notice of the sisters' presence in Albany and Troy in those cities' newspapers. I found no mention of the visit in *The Daily Albany Argus*, *The Albany State*

In Manhattan they set themselves up in Barnum's Hotel and began to accept visitors at specified hours in the morning, afternoon, and evening. By this time they had established a consistent set of rules for receiving guests. These they posted on the door to the parlor where they received visitors. They specified the admission fee, that guests were to sit where instructed during the seance, and that visitors should deport themselves as in a "solemn religious assembly."²⁸ The sisters carefully presented themselves in a way which would appeal to an upscale clientele and exclude the lower classes. Indeed, Fish wrote that they considered raising their fee to five dollars to "keep the rabble away."²⁹

They set themselves up in a parlor in the hotel, which had a long table around which thirty people could sit, and gave three public sessions a day, each lasting two or more hours. Most of their visitors were members of the professional middle class who could afford the not insubstantial admission fee.³⁰ Each would wait his or her turn to ask questions.³¹ Generally the questions were about dead loved ones or famous people. The more skeptical class of visitor asked questions designed to test the sisters, while others, who wanted to believe, asked questions in search of comfort and reassurance about the afterlife. Sometimes the spirits would oblige with answers, while sometimes they remained silent. Often they gave correct answers to questions, but often they were wrong as well. The wrong answers were generally attributed to bad spirits.

Register, or *The Albany Evening Journal*, but the *Troy Daily Whig* did report on the visit; *Troy Daily Whig*, May 1, 3, 11, 20, and 25, 1850.

²⁷Leah states that they arrived in NYC on June 4, 1850, *The Missing Link*, 128. But newspaper reports indicate that they were in the city as early as May 29. *The Evening Post*, June 1, 1850; *New York Tribune*, June 5, 1850.

²⁸*New York Herald*, June 17, 1850.

²⁹Underhill, *Missing Link*, 128; A dollar was a significant amount to pay. For comparison the very best seats at the theater at this time cost no more than fifty cents, and the typical lecture cost twenty-five cents.

³⁰Underhill, *Missing Link*, 128-130.

³¹Newspaper accounts primarily mention men attending these public seances. Whether this is because men predominated as guests or because newspapers simply omitted women who were present is unclear. Most likely there was some distinction between the public and private seances in regards to gender. Women may have gravitated more towards private seances in homes.

Most of the city papers sent representatives to report on the knockings. Horace Greeley went with a friend to see for himself the phenomena his paper had been reporting on for months. His own questions were answered correctly by the spirits, but those of his friend were answered incorrectly in all but one case. He did not believe that any overt deception was involved, but still, Greeley was not ready to declare himself convinced one way or another. He stated his suspicion that some form of mesmerism was involved. Greeley's greatest difficulty, however, was in believing "that spirits have nothing better to do than make fruitless revelations by means of thumps and raps."³² He longed for answers to serious philosophical and theological questions, not the continual repetition of mundane information about the recently dead. Greeley was not content with performance alone; he wanted a usable philosophy, but the Fox sisters were not about to give it to him, so he suspended judgment and decided to continue investigating the matter.³³

A writer for *The Evening Post* also visited Barnum's Hotel in the first week of the sisters' visit but recounted a very unsatisfying session with the spirits. None of the visitors at the time he was there received satisfactory answers. This was explained to him by Fish as the result of "some mischievous little spirits present who... seemed desirous of amusing themselves by annoying and confusing the audience."³⁴ These "mischievous little spirits" were undoubtedly her two younger sisters, who most likely interrupted the tedium of day after day of constant seances by taunting, not only their customers, but their older sister as well, under whose control they had fallen.

Unlike these other writers who did not commit themselves one way or another, H.W., presumably a junior editor at *The New York Herald*, had no problem stating the

³²*New York Tribune*, June 5, 1850.

³³Greeley's position on the raps has often been misinterpreted. Many have taken his statements that there was no deception out of context and interpreted it as belief in spirits and spiritualist philosophy. Greeley was interested, but that interest should not be interpreted as any sort of acceptance of spiritualist beliefs. He was one of the many (perhaps even majority) who attended seances with an open curious mind, yet never came to definitive conclusions to explain them.

³⁴*The Evening Post*, June 6, 1850.

“conviction on my mind is that it is a deception.” While some of those present when he visited the hotel received correct answers, he did not. Furthermore when he tried to look below the table during the session all rapping stopped. Fish explained this to him as the result of his “disposition not to believe” or his “desire to detect and expose a deception.” H.W. was forced to conclude that “a dollar might certainly be spent worse, but, as I now think, not much worse.”³⁵

* * *

These reports on the rappings in New York City offer a picture of the sisters near the beginning of their public careers. While, for the most part, they were successful in directing attention away from themselves and towards “the spirits”, some writers became interested in the young women at the center of this new sensation. These sources reveal that the deportment and appearance of the sisters were, for many, the most convincing part of the rappings. “Their manner,” remarked Greeley, “is quiet and refined, and all their actions are marked by entire propriety.” He observed that they did not act like perpetrators of fraud. “They seemed at perfect ease, and their whole deportment exhibited an apparent frankness and sincerity which would dispose one to acquit them of any intent to deceive.”³⁶ George Ripley agreed with this assessment, remarking that, “the manners and bearing of the ladies are such as to create a prepossession in their favor.” Ripley went on to note the apparent passivity of the sisters. “They have no theories to offer in explanation of the acts of their mysterious attendants, and apparently have no control of their incomings or outgoings.”³⁷

The sophisticated editor and author, Nathaniel P. Willis, was also impressed by the sisters, noting that they were “considerably prettier than the average.” Willis admired not only their looks but also their passive and obliging behavior. Speaking on behalf of all the guests at Rufus Griswold’s house, he noted that “throughout the evening, we were struck

³⁵*The New York Herald*, June 17, 1850.

³⁶*The New York Tribune*, June 5, 1850.

³⁷*The New York Tribune*, June 8, 1850.

with their combined good-humor and simplicity, and the ease and unpretendingness with which they let their visitors (from both worlds) have their own way. They evidently won the respect and liking of all present, as the evening went on."³⁸ Even the writer for *The Herald*, who expressed his belief that the whole thing was a fraud, took time to remark on Maggie Fox's appearance and behavior. "She is a very pretty, arch-looking, black-eyed, and rather modestly behaved young girl."³⁹

This favorable attention to appearance is of particular importance when we take into account contemporary beliefs in physiognomy which linked physical appearance to character. Honest or modest appearance was believed to reflect an honest or modest character. Reinforcing this evidence were beliefs about gender which assigned reason to men and passivity to women. The proper feminine deportment of the sisters was an indication that the girls fit the accepted rules of gender. It followed that they would not have the intellectual capacity to deceive the gentlemen who came to investigate. It was difficult to believe that pretty, well-behaved, and seemingly passive young ladies could attempt gross deception: it was even harder to believe that these mere girls could do it successfully in the presence of well educated and rational men.

On the other hand, those writers who recognized intelligence in spirit-rappers also recognized deception. Generally they acknowledged intelligence in Leah Fish first. While she was the least proficient at making the sounds, she was the wisest observer of human behavior and generally directed the seances.⁴⁰ Greeley noted that Fish "seemed to be on the most familiar terms with the knocking," meaning that she often directed questions to the spirits and interpreted the knocks for visitors.⁴¹ Critics of the spirit-rapping observed that Leah Fish was a shrewd judge of human nature. J. Stanley Grimes, a leading mesmerist and phrenologist who believed the spirit rappings a fraud, saw in the two younger girls

³⁸*The Home Journal*, June 15, 1850.

³⁹*The New York Herald*, June 17, 1850.

⁴⁰Reuben Briggs Davenport, *Death-Blow to Spiritualism*, (New York: G.W. Dillingham, 1888), 127

⁴¹*The New York Tribune*, June 5, 1850.

“very little of the ability to take a leading part in such a performance,” but in Fish he observed “a masculine and energetic temperament,” which led him to believe she was at the center of the fraud.⁴²

These comments indicate that the Fox sisters were walking a fine line between celebrity and gentility. They were the latest public craze, yet they also had to maintain the deportment of young ladies. The location of their seances in the parlors of city hotels indicates the mixture of public and private settings. As long as they could maintain the perception that they were respectable young women, rather than professional public performers, they would prove successful. Like Kane, who combined humanitarianism with public curiosity, the Fox sisters had to combine gentility with public curiosity, but theirs was a much more difficult task. Male respectability could be cultivated in the public sphere, as Kane cultivated his with his use of scientific discourse, but female respectability was largely understood to be private. The Fox sisters could not remain genteel for long if they remained in public.

* * *

Most of those who visited the sisters at Barnum’s Hotel during this first visit to New York City were men of the middle and upper classes. Those of reformist leanings, like Greeley and Ripley, were most prevalent, but interest was not confined to this class. The most striking departure from this trend came in early July when Captain Isaiah Rynders visited the sisters. Rynders was well known throughout New York as the leader of the Empire Club, an organization associated with Tammany Hall, whose membership, according to one historian, “was made up of a choice variety of picked worthies who could argue a mooted point to a finish with knuckles.”⁴³ Far from sympathizing with reforms like abolition, Rynders was known as a democratic supporter of the urban working class and recent Irish immigrants and a staunch enemy of evangelical reformers. Just two

⁴²*The New York Tribune*, July 17, 1850

⁴³Gustavus Myers, *The History of Tammany Hall*, (New York: Gustavus Myers, 1901), 161.

months before meeting with the Fox sisters, Rynders had caused a near riot at an abolition convention by mounting the podium and encouraging racist hecklers.⁴⁴ This was not an isolated incident: the Empire Club routinely broke up Whig, and especially abolition, meetings with violence and intimidation.⁴⁵

Rynders was not about to believe in spirits. He went to see the sisters out of curiosity and with the intention of trying to expose their trick. But after visiting with them several times, he wrote to the *Herald* to confess, while he still did not believe in spirits, he could not discover how the thing was done. Rynders's letter is interesting in that he genuinely seemed to admire the sisters, while at the same time he believed them to be tricking the public. Calling Maggie and Kate Fox beautiful and intelligent women, he expressed his admiration. "If they humbug you, they do it in the most amusing and agreeable manner, and it is well worth five dollars, instead of one, to witness their superior tact in confounding all attempts to disconcert or detect them, besides experiencing the pleasing impressions they leave upon every unprejudiced mind."⁴⁶

Rynders's curiosity about the rappings represents a little studied aspect of spirit-rapping. While most historians place it firmly within the context of the perfectionist reform and religious enthusiasm coming out of upstate New York at the time, spirit-rapping also moved well beyond that context to find a natural home in the fast-paced urban world of New York City. Someone like Rynders had nothing but scorn for evangelical or perfectionist movements of the burnt-over district, but he did not understand spirit rapping to be the equivalent of Mormonism or Millerism. Spirit-rapping to him was a wonderful puzzle and an intellectual exercise. Spirit-rapping might be a scam, but what an entertaining scam it was! The New York out of which Isaiah Rynders emerged was a competitive place where people got what they wanted using their wits and their strength. If

⁴⁴Anthony Gronowicz, *Race & Class Politics in New York City Before the Civil War*, (Boston: Northeastern University, 1998), 141-142.

⁴⁵M. R. Werner, *Tammany Hall*, (Garden City: Doubleday, Doran & Company, 1928), 65.

⁴⁶*New York Herald*, July 12, 1850.

you could separate a fool from his money why not do it? When Rynders looked at the Fox sisters, he saw three lower class women making an excellent living at the expense of weaker minds. They were entertaining, they were clever, and they made the weak minded Whiggish reformers, whom Rynders despised, look like fools.

Rynders's article in the *Herald* gives a detailed description of his own session with the sisters and those of others he observed. He recounted how easily convinced some people were, like the man who needed smelling salts after the sisters accurately rapped out his age, even though "any intelligent child twelve years of age could have guessed his age within a year or two."⁴⁷ Others, according to Rynders, would receive one wrong answer and declare the whole thing a sham unworthy of further investigation. Rynders delighted in the mystery, and he was convinced the rapping was caused by human agency, yet that did not diminish his interest. Like the thousands who went to Barnum's Museum to try to detect the stitches that connected the Feejee Mermaid's fish tail to its monkey body, Rynders enjoyed the rapping and admired the Fox sisters for their ability to make a fool even of himself.

Spirit-rapping appealed to a growing number of Americans who were drawn to mystery and debate. Their culture was marked by both democratic sensibility and consumerism, and can be seen in such widely divergent venues as the dime museum, the new genre of detective fiction pioneered by Edgar Allan Poe, and the growth of the penny press, all of which used exoticism and mystery to draw in an interested public.⁴⁸

Historian Neil Harris has shown that during this same era another promoter of the new mass popular culture, the great showman P.T. Barnum, often deliberately generated

⁴⁷*The New York Herald*, July 12, 1850.

⁴⁸Karen Halttunen has dealt with the issue of anxiety over issues of sincerity verses deception at this time in *Confidence Men and Painted Women: A Study of Middle-Class Culture in America, 1830-1870*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1982), but as I argue here, there was also a level of enjoyment of the process of discovering issues of truth versus falsehood. For this see Halttunen's more recent work, *Murder Most Foul: The Killer and the American Gothic Imagination*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998).

controversial publicity as a way to draw in customers. Barnum even went so far as to denounce anonymously his own exhibits as frauds when public interest seemed to wane. Harris claims that Barnum, and other showmen like him, understood "that the opportunity to debate the *issue* of falsity, to discover how deception had been practiced, was even more exciting than the discovery of fraud itself."⁴⁹ Like a controversial exhibit in Barnum's Museum or a controversial murder trial, the opportunity spirit-rapping offered for competitive public debate was a great attraction.

* * *

In appealing to antebellum America's love of a good controversy, the spirit-rapping drew support from the growth of the mass circulation newspaper that began in the 1830s and expanded into the 1840s and 1850s. While, in the past, each newspaper had been the organ of a specific political party and designed to voice that party's official position, while still providing political, economic, and foreign news, the antebellum era saw the rise of a new kind of newspaper commonly called the penny press. These were inexpensive newspapers, sold daily on the street. They sought out larger readerships by catering to the curiosity of the public with stories emphasizing conflict and sensation. Unlike earlier political papers, the penny press catered to the broadest possible readership, including the working-classes that were swelling the population of eastern cities like New York. These papers sought to educate as well as entertain their readers. New York papers like the *Sun*, *Herald*, and *Tribune* had large circulations because they lowered prices, appealed to public tastes, and provided news of interest to a broad spectrum of readers.⁵⁰

One technique used to increase circulation was to generate controversy over a mystery. James Gordon Bennett of the *Herald*, for example, tripled his paper's circulation by taking a controversial stance in the sensational murder case of the prostitute, Helen

⁴⁹Neil Harris, *Humbug; The Art of P.T. Barnum*, (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1973), 77.

⁵⁰ John D. Stevens, *Sensationalism and the New York Press*, (New York: Columbia University Press), 1-28.

Jewett, in 1836, and defending his stance against the contrary opinions voiced by the other city papers.⁵¹ More recently, the grisly murder of Doctor George Parkman and the subsequent arrest, trial and execution of his killer, Professor John Webster of Harvard, had filled the columns of the penny press. These murder stories appeared alongside stories of strange and exotic happenings like the unrolling of a mummy or accounts of faraway lands and recent geographic explorations like the Grinnell Expedition.⁵² The papers carried serious political, economic, and foreign news as well, and their sensationalism certainly did not rival that of a later age, but they differed from their predecessors by embracing the goal of profit by means of mass circulation. They appealed to the widest possible public tastes, so they are a good indication of public interests at the same time that they created even greater public attention to the stories they highlighted.

The case of the “Mysterious Knockings” was just the sort of story to catch readers’ attention and sell papers. It had both mystery and controversy, not to mention three reportedly pretty young women. It offered an opportunity to the different papers to define themselves in relation to one another by their positions. Some papers dismissed the knockings out of hand as just another bit of fanatical idiocy coming out of a region notorious for its religious crazes. The *Herald*, under the direction of Bennett, led this sort of criticism. As a paper leaning toward the Democratic side of the political spectrum, it frowned upon anything it saw as “fanaticism.” It portrayed the rappings as fraud and delusion. “There are many queer people and queer things in Rochester,” the *Herald* observed. It pointed out that anti-Masonry as well as Mormonism, two movements of

⁵¹James L. Crouthamel, *Bennett’s New York Herald and the Rise of the Popular Press*, (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1989), 19-42, passim; Don C. Seitz, *The James Gordon Bennetts, Father and Son, Proprietors of the New York Herald*, (Indianapolis: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, 1928), 46-47; Patricia Cline Cohen, *The Murder of Helen Jewett; The Life and Death of a Prostitute in Nineteenth-Century New York*, (New York: Knopf, 1998).

⁵²On the emergence of the murder mystery genre at this time, in culture as well as literature, see Halttunen, *Murder Most Foul*, 91-134.

which Bennett and the *Herald* disapproved, originated in the region.⁵³ The *Herald* steadfastly maintained that the knockings were produced by knaves and listened to by fools. Bennett used the rappings as a way to criticize ideas he did not like and linked them with radical ideologies, like Fourierism or socialism, that he disagreed with. He also used them to attack rival papers, claiming that the knockings were “supported chiefly by the *Tribune* and the *Sun*, those organs of all kinds of isms and humbugs.”⁵⁴ In an article entitled “The Socialistic Humbugs of the Day,” Bennett dismissed the knockings as ventriloquism and accused Rufus Griswold of trying to make money with them.⁵⁵

As we have already seen, Horace Greeley’s *Tribune* took a different approach and called for further investigation of the rappings. After the letter sent by Capron and Willets, and after Greeley’s editorial, which invited dialogue on the raps, readers wrote to the *Tribune* from around the country expressing a variety of views. A man signing his name “W” argued that the content of the communications did not matter so much as the fact of the communications, which he claimed contributed to the fight against “dogmatism.” As a champion of the importance of human inquiry above religious authority of any sort, W asserted that the rapping “teaches what all men ought to know, namely, that they should never for a moment surrender their own rational powers in the acquisition of truth.” To this writer, spirit rapping was important because it stimulated reasoned inquiry, not because of any absolute truth it advocated or definitive answers it provided.⁵⁶

W was not alone in his thirst for investigation. It appeared “most extraordinary,” to “L.M.” writing in January that, in the face of the rappings, anyone could “relinquish inquiry and investigation till all is explained or the limits ascertained that restrict our knowledge. Meanwhile let us prepare ourselves for advancement of knowledge by leaving the citadel of Prejudice, though we retain the sword of Reason and the shield of Faith.”⁵⁷

⁵³*The New York Herald*, January 23, 1850.

⁵⁴*The New York Herald*, February 6, 1850, May 9, 1850.

⁵⁵*The New York Herald*, June 16, 1850.

⁵⁶*The New York Tribune*, December 10, 1849.

⁵⁷*The New York Tribune*, January 11, 1850.

This was soon followed by a three-column editorial by Greeley in which he reviewed Eliab Capron's new book, then on sale in New York for 25 cents. Capron's book gave a positive version of the history of the mysterious noises and presented the rappings as a reconciliation between spirituality and materialism. Greeley weighed the available evidence about the rappings in this book, and in the end found himself unable to draw conclusions one way or another. He continued to call for active, yet skeptical, investigation.⁵⁸

These writers were all using the rappings as a way to debate philosophical issues in a popular forum. Most prominent were the issues of the relationship between science and religion and the relationship between thought and matter. Eliab Capron, for example, in a pamphlet published early in 1850, claimed that the greatest mistake of older forms of science and religion was the distinction and separation they made between spirit and matter. Spiritualism, he claimed, showed that such a separation was not valid.⁵⁹

Soon more writers to the *Tribune* began to offer their speculations as to the origin and meaning of the rappings. "W.F.", who had witnessed the rappings in western New York, wrote to the paper giving a brief history of beliefs in spirits in the past by a variety of mystics and philosophers including Confucius, Zoroaster, Plato, Jesus, and Swedenborg. He then went on to speculate on the ability of spirits to control electricity in order to produce rapping sounds and to caution the *Tribune's* readers that, even if the raps were produced by spirits, care was still necessary in case the spirits were of a lower, rather than higher, order. Both W.F and Greeley felt it necessary to quote scripture's warning "Believe not every Spirit," just in case these spirits came from below rather than above.⁶⁰

* * *

This generally positive view of the Rochester knockings in the *Tribune* did not last forever. Philosophical debate was soon joined by debates over truth and deception. By the

⁵⁸*The New York Tribune*, January 18, 1850; Capron and Brittan, *Singular Revelations*.

⁵⁹Eliab Capron and Henry Barron, *Singular Revelations*, 8.

⁶⁰*The New York Tribune*, January 23, 1850.

beginning of 1850, even before the sisters arrived in New York, a new class of “anti-spiritualists” had emerged, dedicated to proving the rappings a fraud. At the end of January and beginning of February these anti-spiritualists began to make themselves heard. On January 31 the *Tribune* reprinted a letter reportedly written by W.A. Langworthy, identified as one of the committee of investigation at Corinthian Hall, which originally appeared in the *Adrian Watchtower*. In it Langworthy claimed that the accounts in the press of the Corinthian Hall demonstration and other seances were grossly exaggerated, and that the girls’ performances had been neither impressive nor convincing to the majority of the witness. Only “a deluded set” in Rochester really believed in the spirits, according to Langworthy.⁶¹

A much greater onslaught came on February 4. “W” from Rochester (apparently a different “W” from the one who wrote in December) wrote giving a very unfavorable first-hand account of the seances then going on in Rochester. He believed that the rapping came from Maggie and Kate Fox and Leah Fish rather than from any spiritual source, although he held out the possibility that they were using mesmerism, clairvoyance or electricity to come up with answers and make the sounds. W asserted that, in attending seances in Rochester, he “never saw any manifestations of superior intellect, but very many that would be beneath the capacity and acquirements of a girl twelve years old.” He was also very suspicious that the so-called manifestations and communications always occurred in the dark, and went on to assert that nine times out of ten the answers to questions put by investigators were incorrect.⁶²

W attacked the notion that the sisters were honest and genteel. Instead he characterized them as dishonest perpetrators of fraud.

I have had a conversation with something purporting to be the disembodied spirit of my brother, when in fact all my brothers are living. I have had information about family affairs, that was as far from truth as light from darkness. I have heard the “spirit” play upon an accordion when I *knew* who

⁶¹*The New York Tribune*, January 31, 1850.

⁶²*The New York Tribune*, February 4, 1850.

was doing it. I have heard rappings on men's heads when I knew whose hands were at work. I have seen the names of persons designated when I knew the signs by which they were communicated to the girls. I have seen the girls talk to each other with their fingers, when one knew what the other did not, and I have heard them deny all knowledge of matters about which I had myself informed them a short time before.⁶³

W furthermore stated that even the believers in spiritualism had a low opinion of the honesty of the sisters, and that Kate Fox "would rather lie than tell the truth." Apparently the sisters had drawn some suspicion upon themselves when the spirits instructed some seance participants to buy the girls new shoes and make them new dresses.⁶⁴

Side by side with this damning letter, the *Tribune* printed two others that continued to maintain belief in the spirits and the dawn of a new age, leading Greeley to ask, "Is the world running mad, or getting sane? - stricken with judicial blindness, or just beginning to see? We must take time to consider and investigate one of these days."⁶⁵ If anyone thought that the apparent exposure of the sisters by W would stifle curiosity about the rappings, they were mistaken. Discussion of the mysterious knockings in the papers was only increased by the added controversy, demonstrating the old adage that there is no such thing as bad publicity.

Back in western New York, Eliab W. Capron was monitoring the discussion he had initiated in the *Tribune*. On February 11, he responded to both Dr. W.A. Langworthy's letter and the exposé by W. The Langworthy letter he declared a forgery. He went on to deny all of the statements made in the letter, declaring once again that the sisters' performances at Corinthian Hall and in private seances had been convincing. Capron then moved on to the letter by W, declaring most of his statements to be untrue. Capron was evidently acquainted with W, who, he said, had the true initials of J.W.H. (the name J. W. Hurd eventually emerged). Interestingly Capron did not deny that there was some doubt about the total honesty of the sisters. Instead he asserted that occasional

⁶³Ibid.

⁶⁴Ibid.

⁶⁵Ibid.

dishonesty, even if proved, could not explain all the strange phenomena he had observed. "Suppose the facts were as stated by him [W] that he had deceived somebody, or that the young ladies had at one time been guilty of deception, would it prove all similar occurrences false and the ladies deceptive in every case?"⁶⁶

Before the girls' visit to New York City, Capron remained their most vocal supporter in the press, but once they had arrived and began to give successful performances, many others, who had been unable to detect any deception, came to the sisters' defense. Interestingly, many of these defenders did not yet believe in the spirits. A surprising number who remained puzzled by the raps were convinced by the girls' deportment that they, at least, were not causing the sounds. The most prominent of these defenders was Greeley himself. At the end of the sisters' visit to New York City in August, they spent almost two weeks in a variety of private homes, including Greeley's, to allow more detailed examination. At the end of this visit, Greeley wrote an editorial stating that he was "convinced beyond a doubt of [the sisters'] perfect integrity and good faith." While many have interpreted this to mean that he believed in the spirits, that is not the case. Greeley was quite clear that he still did not know how to explain the rappings. He was only willing to rule out fraud.⁶⁷

Others, however, were unwilling to take that step. As the fame of the Fox sisters grew through the latter months of 1850 and into 1851, a group of men emerged to capitalize on the raps by denouncing them. Ironically this group probably helped the growth of spirit rapping more than it hurt it. The most prominent arguments against spiritualism came from Stanley Grimes, Chauncey Burr, and a trio who would come to be known as "the Buffalo Doctors." While on the surface the spiritualists and anti-spiritualists

⁶⁶*The New York Tribune*, February 11, 1850.

⁶⁷*The New York Tribune*, August 10, 1850. Greeley's wife was another matter entirely. She had not been mentally well in a long time and she and her husband had recently lost their youngest child Pickie. The result was that she came to believe strongly in the spirits. Barbara Goldsmith, *Other Powers*:, 55-62.

seem in opposition, in reality they were all part of the same phenomenon. Both groups appealed to the popular love of investigation and mystery. All felt that it was the prerogative of citizens of a democratic nation to debate serious issues, and that is what they did.

The first prominent anti-spiritualist was Stanley Grimes, one of the country's best known lecturers on mesmerism and phrenology. He had spoken in many cities and towns in western New York while the rapping was getting underway. By his own description, his lectures centered on "Phrenology, Physiology and Mesmerism as parts of one great science of Human Nature."⁶⁸ Grimes believed in the power of both mesmerism and clairvoyance, but when it came to spiritualism he balked.⁶⁹ At first he seemed to believe that the Fox sisters were simply clairvoyant, but after further investigation, he came to the conclusion that they were clever frauds. He claimed to have drawn a confession out of one woman in western New York who, said Grimes, had learned her tricks from the Fox sisters.⁷⁰ In a series of letters to the *Tribune*, Grimes eventually got around to the Fox sisters, whom he visited at their hotel in Manhattan. Grimes did not pretend to discover exactly how the sisters fooled people, but he gave a skeptical account of the whole affair, pointing out that the rules of the séance were "such as are calculated to prevent rigid scrutiny."⁷¹ He then went on to use phrenology to explain both the gullibility of a believer, the shape of whose head "indicated that it was well adapted for the habitation of superstitious ideas," and the cunning of Leah Fish, whose head indicated "courage, cunning, skepticism and a ready practical skill."⁷²

After this series of letters, Grimes became the focus of debate about the spirituality or non-spirituality of the knocks. One rebuttal of Grimes implied that he was scared that spiritual revelations from mediums would undermine his own career as a lecturer on

⁶⁸*The New York Tribune*, July 3, 1850.

⁶⁹Earnest Isaacs, "A History," 141-147.

⁷⁰*The New York Tribune*, July 9, 1850.

⁷¹*The New York Tribune*, July 17, 1850.

⁷²*Ibid.*

“animal magnetism,” and that he had probably elicited a false confession from the medium in western New York by means of mesmerism. Others thought that Grimes was simply trying to further his own career.⁷³ The debate, which lasted from the beginning of July to the beginning of August, 1850 in the *Tribune*, included a series of letters with the headings “Grimes on Knocking” or “Knocking on Grimes.” It was not a friendly scientific disagreement. Writers increasingly accused their opponents of fraud, delusion, and just plain stupidity. Spirit-rapping was becoming a controversial topic that drew bitter accusations from both sides. Capron’s friend, Henry Barron, defended himself from what he called a “calumny of foul abuse heaped upon my friends and myself,” while in the same letter he called Grimes a false “aspirant for fame.”⁷⁴ Another correspondent, writing to the *Evening Post* but responding to the debate appearing in the *Tribune*, lamented upon the “moral weakness displayed by the principle part of the audience” at seances he had attended.⁷⁵ Clearly it would be difficult for the sisters to maintain their aura of innocent gentility within such a milieu.

C. Chauncey Burr, the editor of *The Nineteenth Century Review*, also put himself before the public as an anti-spiritualist. In addition to being an editor, Burr gave lectures on “Imagination and Ghost-seeing.” He was often accompanied by his brother Heman. In these lectures they demonstrated the susceptibility of the human mind to mesmeric powers of suggestion. From the start, Burr had believed the spirit rapping a fraud, but he did not become concerned, he later said, until he saw “many imaginative persons driven to the wildest extravagances, and some to absolute insanity, by the phenomena.”⁷⁶ Spurred on by his concern for the mental well being of the nation, he began to visit mediums and investigate their performances. Soon he found that he could reproduce the “knockings”

⁷³*The New York Tribune*, July 31, 1850, August 1, 1850.

⁷⁴*The New York Tribune*, July 31, 1850.

⁷⁵*Evening Post* (New York), August 3, 1850.

⁷⁶*The New York Tribune*, January 11, 1851.

quite loudly by cracking the joint of his big toe, and he could explain the medium's ability to convince participants by his previous study of human imagination.⁷⁷

Burr decided that he could add an anti-spiritualist element to his lectures on imagination and ghost-seeing. So, beginning on January 13, 1851, he gave a lecture entitled "Spiritual Knockings Exposed," which ran for three nights at Hope Chapel on Broadway.⁷⁸ Burr showed the audience that he could produce raps loud enough for them all to hear with his big toe, while his brother, Heman, demonstrated his ability to control the imagination and will of members of the audience chosen at random. Horace Greeley attended the last of these performances, but remained unconvinced that fraud was proven.⁷⁹ Burr may not have convinced the editor of the *Tribune*, but he continued to spread his anti-spiritualist message on the lecture circuit. Among other engagements, in February he debated S.B. Brittan, a noted supporter of spiritualism, in Bridgeport, but Burr seemed unable to convince those who believed in the raps to change their minds.⁸⁰

A more convincing blow to the rappings came in late February 1851. The sisters had returned to Rochester in the Fall of 1850 after their successful summer in Manhattan, but soon they began to receive calls to appear publicly again. By the end of the year, Kate Fox, accompanied by her mother, had gone back to New York to live for a time in various private households, while Fish and Maggie Fox took a trip to Buffalo to give public seances at the Phelps House Hotel. For a time, Fox and her older sister gave successful and convincing performances, but unfortunately, after some weeks in Buffalo they were surprised to find in the columns of *The Buffalo Commercial Advertiser* a stunning exposé that accused them of fraud and claimed to know the secret of the "mysterious knockings."

The article, written by Dr. C.B. Coventry, Dr. Charles A. Lee, and Dr. T.M. Foote, who soon came to be known as "The Buffalo Doctors," was written in the most

⁷⁷*The New York Tribune*, January 11, 1851, January 13, 1851, January 17, 1851.

⁷⁸*The New York Tribune*, January 13, 1851.

⁷⁹*The New York Tribune*, January 17, 1851.

⁸⁰*The New York Tribune*, February 5, 1851.

authoritative-sounding scientific language they could muster. They claimed that they had been driven by curiosity to visit the sisters at the Phelps house and come up with a logical explanation of the raps. The doctors informed the reading public that they had arrived at their conclusion that the raps were a fraud by “the application of a method of reasoning much resorted to in the diagnosis of disease - namely, the reasoning *by way of exclusion*.”⁸¹ They went on to explain that the knockings could not be regarded as spiritual if they could be accounted for physically. “We are thus to *exclude* spiritual causation in this stage of the investigation.”⁸² They then went on to “exclude” artificial machinery hidden in the sisters’ dresses and the use of the vocal cords, so that the sounds must come from the “action of the will, through voluntary muscles, upon the joints.”⁸³ They thought that the knee-joint was the most likely. Finally they stated that they had found a “highly respectable lady” in Buffalo who could produce sounds with her knee joint.

The Buffalo Doctors’ exposé was actually no more impressive than that of Chauncey Burr, but it was delivered with the pompous self-assurance of medical doctors and soon appeared in a medical journal, causing many to take it more seriously. Fish and Fox, however, did not back off in defeat. Rather they vigorously challenged the doctors. This was actually not so hard to do, for the strength of the doctors’ argument was also its weakness. Though they spoke with authority, those attracted to spirit-rapping were usually dissatisfied with the explanations of the world provided by sources of authority. Further, the assumption of their argument “by exclusion” was that spiritual explanations were secondary to material explanations, hardly an argument likely to convince the many supporters of spirit-rapping who believed that the dichotomy between matter and spirit could be reconciled. To Fish, reflecting back on the episode years later, the Buffalo doctors represented “the materialistic bigotry of modern science... in arms against us and

⁸¹Buffalo Doctors, *Rochester Knockings! Discovery and Explanation of the Source of the Phenomena Generally Known as the Rochester Knockings*, (Buffalo: George H. Derby and Co., 1851), 6.

⁸²Buffalo Doctors, *Rochester Knockings!*, 7.

⁸³Ibid.

the Spirits.”⁸⁴ An attack on spirit rapping from that quarter only solidified support for the sisters by those unsatisfied with a purely materialist science.

The greatest challenge to the Buffalo doctors came from Fox and Fish themselves, who refused to back down or to act like exposed con-artists. Instead they boldly sent back a challenge to the doctors via a public letter printed in all the local papers. “As we do not feel willing to rest under the imputation of being impostors,” they wrote, “we are very willing to undergo a proper and decent examination.” Professing absolute innocence and a desire to get to the bottom of the mystery, the sisters agreed that, “it is due to the world that the investigation be made, and that the ‘humbug’ be exposed.”⁸⁵ With this simple challenge they skillfully turned their “exposure” into an opportunity for open-minded debate. This publicity insured that for weeks following they would have ample business as crowds came to investigate for themselves. When they finally left Buffalo, Leah Fish would conclude, “in a financial point of view, we had never met with an equal success.”⁸⁶ Yet such boldness was risky too. It exposed them to accusations of not being respectable women.

A few weeks after their triumph in Buffalo, the sisters were assailed by another exposé. Chauncey and Heman Burr, continuing their anti-spiritualist investigations, somehow obtained a deposition from Mrs. Norman Culver, a relative of the Fox family who lived in Arcadia, New York. In her statement, dated April 17, 1851, Mrs. Culver claimed that at first she had believed in the rappings, but had soon seen something which had made her suspect fraud. To test her theory she approached Kate Fox and offered to assist her in answering test questions and making the raps. Soon Fox revealed to Mrs. Culver that the raps were produced by the toe joints, and showed her how to do it. According to Mrs. Culver, Fox then explained to her that it was usually easy to guess the

⁸⁴Underhill, *Missing-Link*, 173.

⁸⁵The letter is reprinted in Underhill, *Missing Link*, 171-2; and Buffalo Doctors, *Rochester Knockings!*, 9.

⁸⁶Underhill, *The Missing Link*, 196.

correct answers to questions by careful observation of a person's body language. At times the girls were also assisted by a Dutch servant girl who would go down to the cellar and knock with her knuckles or a broom stick on the ceiling.⁸⁷ After this deposition appeared in the papers, the sisters simply denied these charges, saying that Mrs. Culver was only a distant relative by marriage, and that she held some grudge against the Fox family.⁸⁸

* * *

By the middle of 1851 there were probably few Americans who had not heard of the "Rochester Knockings." Whether they thought them a complete humbug or a sign of the dawning of a new age, Americans took an interest in the mystery and controversy surrounding this new phenomenon. When the Fox sisters came to town, some would go to see them to communicate with the departed, but others would go to see the show, to test their wits against the skills of the "knockers," and to try to detect how the noises were produced. Depending on one's perspective, differing issues were raised. Some saw spirit-rapping as a return to the superstitions of an earlier era, while others saw spirit-rapping as a way to combat the closed-minded "dogmatism" of both the established church and materialist science. The ability the Fox sisters offered to publicly explore these issues continued to draw in crowds. No exposé, no matter how well founded, would be able to stop it.

Spirit-rapping was an activity aptly suited to a new democratic age. Ordinary people were invited to use their senses and their minds to discover for themselves the meaning of the raps. Here was a wonder of the world that could be witnessed by all. The Fox sisters and their anti-spiritualist opponents used both sensation and reasoned argument. They invited every American to be an explorer and thus shape the future of human understanding. They made a good living while they were at it.

⁸⁷*New York Tribune*, June 3, 1851.

⁸⁸*New York Tribune*, October 18, 1851.

The sisters were able to survive for a time in this competitive world by clothing themselves in ideals of female innocence, virtue, and gentility, but they were running a risk in doing so. When they entered the public world, their respectability also came under attack. To those who were not convinced of their honesty they became the worst sort of women. Deception was an ugly thing to antebellum Americans; it was unappealing in men, but positively repulsive in women. If the Fox sisters were found to be deceivers, all the gains they had made since beginning their rappings over two years before could be lost.

CHAPTER FIVE

CURIOSITY AND VALUES IN ANTEBELLUM LECTURES HALLS

There is no better intellectual discipline than the habit of hearing the different sides of important questions discussed, in a dignified yet earnest way, by persons who represent the most adverse positions. If truth is not always sifted from error by this process, the mind of the listener, at least, is discharged of its bigotry and prejudices, and put in a condition to weight evidence properly, and draw correct conclusions.

“The Lecture System.”
*The New York Evening Post*¹

When Elisha Kane returned from the first Grinnell Expedition in the Autumn of 1851, he immediately went to work to keep alive the enthusiasm that had driven that expedition. Writing to Lady Jane Franklin, he observed that the “tone of the press is favorable to continued search and it will not be difficult to keep the subject sufficiently prominent” to promote further expeditions.² While many of the members of the expedition spoke to the press, giving accounts of the marvels of the Arctic seas, Kane’s quickly became the dominant voice. By all accounts he was a charming man and could tell a good tale. He, more than the others, summoned up for listeners at home the thrill of Arctic travel.

Within a few months of the Grinnell Expedition’s return, the winter lecture season began, and Kane decided to try this forum. He delivered his first series of lectures at the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, D.C. in late December. The Smithsonian had been founded less than six years before, dedicated to the “increase and diffusion of knowledge.” Here he had the opportunity to address some of the most prominent minds in the country, such as Joseph Henry, the superintendent of the Smithsonian, as well as a popular

¹Reprinted in *Littell’s Living Age*, 40, (1854), 115.

²EKK to Lady Jane Franklin, November 15, 1851, EKK Papers.

audience. Interest in his lecture clearly moved beyond the scientific elite. The *New York Daily Times*, a new penny newspaper, devoted a remarkable four columns to this lecture, even though it was given in Washington not New York.³

Kane began his course of three lectures at the Smithsonian with a brief history of Arctic exploration dating back to the European discovery of the Americas. He then moved to a discussion of the important geographical discoveries made by past polar explorers and reviewed the theory of the Open Polar Sea. He then turned to the history of the Franklin expedition and expressed his conviction that Franklin had sailed, or drifted in the ice, northward through Wellington Channel into this "*Polyna*," (another word for open sea). Using maps, he laid out a very convincing (although entirely mistaken) argument, based upon his observations while on the Grinnell Expedition, that Franklin's course had been to the north. His arguments seemed to one newspaper reporter to be "almost conclusive."⁴ He then moved on to the question of whether or not any of the men from the Franklin expedition remained alive. "The consideration of this question was made exceedingly interesting by the lecturer," observed the *New York Daily Times*.⁵ He reviewed the conditions he had observed in the polar regions and expressed his opinion that the *Erebus* and *Terror* could not both have been crushed and sunk. Furthermore, he observed, the Arctic regions held all the necessary ingredients needed to sustain life. Even if stranded, a significant portion of the crew may have been able to survive on the natural resources of the region.⁶

Kane also described the dangers and sublime beauty the Grinnell Expedition had faced while in the Arctic. He invited his audience to picture the scene and to take part in the

³The *New York Daily Times*, January 10, 1852; It was normal for newspapers to print detailed reviews of popular lectures the day after they were given, but usually these were not more than a single column, and usually they appeared only in the papers of the city where the lecture was given.

⁴*Public Ledger*, (Philadelphia), January 6, 1852.

⁵The *New York Daily Times*, January 10, 1852.

⁶*Ibid.*

mysteries of the Arctic as if they had been there themselves. He laid out the available evidence and gave his conclusions, but he also asked the audience to decide for themselves where they thought Franklin had gone. Like the latest detective fiction or unsolved murder, or, for that matter, like the spirit-rappers, Kane's presentation appealed to the imaginations of his audience and their desires to take part in the process of discovery. But unlike the spirit-rappers, with Kane there was no taint of deception or self interest. His goals of finding Franklin and the Open Polar Sea seemed noble and virtuous.

His efforts in the Smithsonian lecture hall did not go unrewarded. The *New York Daily Times* reported that "a brilliant assembly of the ladies and gentlemen of Washington" attended Kane's lectures, and that they "manifested their appreciation of his effort in frequent demonstrations of applause."⁷ He ended his third and final lecture with a heartfelt call to action which stressed themes of honor and virtue more than it did geography. "Still the search cannot, will not be abandoned," he was quoted in the *Times*.

The pride of a heroic nation can never consent to yield up the children she has sent forth to peril without tracing out their pathway of disastrous duty, and at least gathering their bones into a grave. Science that recognizes no nationality less comprehensive than the world it enlightens - Christian philanthropy that has expounded the circle of brotherhood til it includes all who suffer - the chivalry of the age, that assigning the first rank of daring to some, pledges all the rest to follow for support of rescue - manhood itself, responsive to the appeals of a noble spirit and heart-stricken wife - all these reject the dishonor of leaving Sir John Franklin and his companions to perish unremembered, and engage the sternest and most exalted and ennobling of human energies to work out the mysterious problem of their fate.⁸

The Smithsonian Institution was an upscale forum of the scientific establishment, but it was also a public institution. Smithsonian Lectures were geared toward an educated public interested in scientific themes. It was a forum designed to allow the nation's most prominent men of science to bestow their learning on a large middle-class and upper-class audience. Kane's success in lecturing in such a forum came not only from his geographic study, but also from his ability to combine this learning with the moral tone of the day. By

⁷Ibid.

⁸Ibid.

combining geographic exploration with a moral crusade, he was able to present his own ambition as humanitarian sacrifice. Unlike the performances of the spirit-rappers, Kane's investigations produced unity more than conflict. There was conflict yes, but the conflict was external to the nation. It was the conflict of heroic men against nature. This was a formula he would repeat a month later when he delivered a lecture in a more popular arena - the Musical Fund Hall in Philadelphia.

This lecture "was attended by a very large and highly appreciative audience, and was listened to by all with evident feelings of sincere satisfaction."⁹ A review of this lecture in *The Philadelphia Evening Bulletin* stressed Kane's engaging style. "It was a vivid picture drawn with masterly skill, and presenting vividly to all, all the perils, and sufferings, and alarms of the Arctic voyager." For this audience, Kane again stressed the search for Franklin as a moral imperative. It could be demonstrated, he claimed, that Franklin might still live. To find him was a goal more noble than mere geographic discovery. It was a goal filled with honor more valuable than military or monetary gain. "We have a more sacred duty, but one alike honorable." Kane was quoted by the *Evening Bulletin*, "We have stained the plains of Mexico with blood to obtain more perishable honors, and men shrink and die upon the banks of the Sacramento in pursuit of gold; but good deeds yield brighter laurels than war, and humanity's triumphs are more valued than gold." When the lecture ended he was met with a hearty applause.¹⁰

* * *

Kane's success as a popular lecturer, after his return from his first Arctic voyage, indicates that the culture of curiosity was as much about values as it was about knowledge. When a Humboldtian explorer like Elisha Kane linked curiosity about geography with humanitarian progress, he was demonstrating that the culture of curiosity operated within a

⁹"Notice of Elisha's Lecture," (clipping from *Philadelphia Evening Bulletin*, February 21, 1852, in Thomas L. Kane Papers, American Philosophical Society Library.

¹⁰*Evening Bulletin*, February 21, 1852.

system of values. Antebellum Americans were not just looking for sensational facts: they did not just want random information about polar bears and icebergs, rather they wanted to discover things which supported ideals they held sacred. Kane was a master of presenting his scientific interests in moral terms with which his listeners could identify, and he would do so in more cities up and down the eastern seaboard in the coming months. He was bombarded with more invitations to lecture than he could possibly accept.

Kane's success as a popular lecturer points to the importance of the lecture hall in antebellum culture. With the newspaper, it was a chief way that new ideas were disseminated. Lectures were tremendously popular because they promoted values of democracy along with notions of gentility and progress. Democracy, after all, was thought to depend upon the quality of the citizenry. If knowledge was disseminated widely throughout the nation then the nation as a whole would be both morally and intellectually uplifted.¹¹

Many of the most prominent men of the United States at this time supplemented their incomes by lecturing. Ralph Waldo Emerson was perhaps the most successful and well known lecturer at this time, but men like Horace Greeley, George Bancroft, and Henry Ward Beecher all spent a good deal of time behind the podium. Almost any subject could be heard in a public lecture, so it is not surprising that both Fox and Kane would find their ways to this media. Science, history, literature, and various types of social and moral ideas were presented to eager audiences. Moving outward from New England, the lecture system came to predominate anywhere that a large enough audience could be assembled.¹²

Lecturers were predominantly white men from the upper reaches of society, but the lecture system was open to others as well. Frederick Douglass was probably the most

¹¹Carl Bode, *The American Lyceum; Town Meeting of the Mind*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1956); Thomas Bender, *Intellect and Public Life: Essays on the Social History of Academic Intellectuals in the United States*, (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993), 3-46.

¹²David Mead, *Yankee Eloquence in the Middle West: The Ohio Lyceum, 1850-1870*, (East Lansing: Michigan State College Press, 1951).

famous of the black lecturers. He was highly popular as an abolitionist speaker. There were also a few women lecturers, such as Mrs. E. Oakes Smith, who generally spoke on topics related to women. A series she gave in New York in the Fall of 1852 included one entitled "Women as inferior to Man" and another on the Egyptian queen, Cleopatra. The *New York Daily Tribune* noted that Mrs. Smith's lectures betrayed "rare cultivation and the beautiful wisdom of feminine genius."¹³ There was even at least one Indian lecturer. George Conway or "Mr. Kah-ge-gag-ah-bowh," who lectured on Ojibwa culture.¹⁴

The object of the lecture, according to one reviewer, was "instruction, excitement, and communication between the higher minds of the age, and those of a lower grade."¹⁵ The lecture system went beyond mere instruction and was generally seen as a sign of American social progress. When Oliver Wendell Holmes gave a lecture on the topic of lecturing, he commented that the lecture "is the natural product of American civilization" since it allowed people of differing opinions to present their views in a refined atmosphere which promoted social harmony.¹⁶ Another writer commented in a similar way that lectures had a social benefit, since they brought the people of a community together to exchange ideas. "Our division into religious sects tends to alienate and estrange us from each other. The lecture-room must become the Social Exchange - the place where acquaintances are made and friendships cemented..."¹⁷

Many also noted the financial aspect of lecturing. An author could write a single lecture then deliver it repeatedly in different cities and towns around the nation for twenty-five to fifty dollars each night. This brought in more money than simply writing an article

¹³*New York Daily Tribune*, October 21, 1852.

¹⁴Donald B. Smith, "The Life of George Copway or Kah-ge-ga-gah-bowh (1818-1869) - and a review of his writings," in *Journal of Canadian Studies*, 23(3), (1988), 5-38; Reviews of Copway's lectures also frequently appeared in periodicals of the day. See for instance *The New York Herald*, February 20, 1849.

¹⁵George Gilfillian, "Popular Lecturers. - Professor Nichol." in *Eclectic Magazine*, 14 (1848), 98.

¹⁶*New York Daily Tribune*, October 28, 1852.

¹⁷*New York Daily Tribune*, November 24, 1852.

that would be published once. Many, if not most, lecturers combined careers as writers or editors with careers as lecturers. Of course this financial side could be a problem as well. What if the desire to bring in ever greater revenue caused the quality of the knowledge to decline?¹⁸

The lecture system was predominantly a top-down institution which allowed the learned to bestow information upon the not-so-learned. Experts in a particular field would be invited to speak on their area of expertise. Great men would bestow knowledge upon the people. But the lecture system also provided a context for new and radical ideas to be both presented and debated. The many reform movements of the antebellum era all utilized the lecture system to disseminate their ideas. As we have already seen, practitioners of new sciences such as phrenology and mesmerism were naturally drawn to the lecture system. In their local lyceums, people were willing to give new ideas a hearing. It was an open-minded format aptly suited to the presentation of new ideas.

* * *

Elisha Kane was in great demand as a lecturer between returning from his first Arctic voyage and departing on his second.¹⁹ He combined a curious and interesting subject matter with a solid delivery and a strong moral message. As such he represented the typical lecturer from the upper reaches of society. Less typical was the way the Fox sisters used the popular lecture system to further their careers. As women, it was harder for them to get up in front of a large audience to speak. Instead, they linked themselves with male lecturers. In Corinthian Hall, they had rapped while Eliab Capron delivered the lecture, then in Troy it had been R.P. Ambler who acted as their spokesman. They gave up that format for a time when they went to New York City in favor of private seances in hotel parlors, but they resumed it again as they began their western tour in the summer of 1851.

¹⁸*Troy Daily Whig*, December 4, 1855; *Eclectic Magazine*, 14, (1848), 98-99; *Public Ledger* (Philadelphia), February 5, 1853.

¹⁹This can be determined from the many invitations to lecture from lecture halls and lyceums around the country which can be found in his papers. He accepted only a fraction of the offers he received.

In the West, they used both hotel parlors and lecture halls to further their careers. Clearly the lecture system, even when they themselves did not give the lectures, contributed significantly to their fame.

* * *

All during the Spring of 1851, Leah Fish had been receiving appeals from friends and acquaintances to visit Ohio. The citizens of Cleveland especially were growing increasingly interested in the new spiritual phenomena they had been reading about in accounts reprinted from New York papers like the *Tribune*. John W. Grey, the editor of northern Ohio's largest newspaper, *The Cleveland Daily Plain Dealer*, was very interested in the rappings and, like Horace Greeley and the *Tribune* in New York, gave them a good deal of free newspaper publicity. The stage was set for a profitable tour.²⁰

The performances of the Fox sisters on their Ohio tour became linked with issues of a scientific and philosophical nature, which were played out quite publicly in lecture halls and newspapers in Ohio. Spirit-rapping, and the debate surrounding it, became an excellent way to discuss the nature of the mind and soul. What was the relationship between the mind and the body and between matter and spirit? These are, and always have been, important questions discussed by scientists and philosophers, but spirit-rapping, like mesmerism and phrenology before it, provided the opportunity to discuss these questions on a popular level. Nowhere was this more apparent than in the days leading up to the Fox sisters' Ohio tour.

The Fox sisters themselves seldom joined in scientific or philosophical debates, but they definitely took advantage of them. In Ohio, they allied themselves with a lecturer named Joel Tiffany, who fancied himself something of a spiritualist philosopher. Tiffany began lecturing on the philosophy of spiritualism in the middle of April 1851 in Cleveland. In these popular lectures, many of which were reported on in detail in *The Plain Dealer*, he discussed spirit-rapping to show his audiences the relationships between mind, body,

²⁰Underhill, *Missing Link*, 221.

spirit, electricity, and magnetism. He began with an explanation of the way the mind controls the muscles through will and compared this with the use of an outside source of electricity to contract muscles. He claimed that electricity and magnetism (terms which he used almost interchangeably) were the “mediums” by which the will controls the body. Various other “mediums” existed in a hierarchical order between matter and spirit. “Taking nature for one teacher in this respect,” lectured Tiffany, “we learn that each of the higher mediums hold dominion over the lower ones, thus, that electricity controls matter, vitality controls electricity, sensation controls vitality, and mind or spirit controls sensation, thus the ultimate attenuated spiritual existence controls all lower existences, and, in that respect, is omnipotent.” Thus electricity was the agency of the spirit-rappings, but the electricity must be controlled by some higher cause, since the rapping demonstrated a higher order of intelligence. He concluded from this that the electricity “excited” during seances must be excited by “individualized spirits.”²¹

It is hard to know whether Tiffany’s lecture made any more sense to his listeners than to the modern reader, but it was clear, then as now, that the crux of his argument was the primacy of spirit over matter. This was an appealing argument in the middle of the nineteenth-century. Science was gaining ascendancy, yet the materialist emphasis of modern science had some disturbing ramifications. The work of geologists such as Charles Lyell was threatening the chronology of scripture. Darwin’s *Origin of Species* was less than a decade away. While few scientists at this time accepted purely materialistic explanations of the universe, increasingly the role of God and of spirit seemed relegated to the sidelines of scientific inquiry. The lectures of Joel Tiffany and other spiritualists re-emphasized the primacy of spirit over matter, but they did so within a scientific framework reminiscent of mainstream natural theology. Thus it was appealing to the antebellum sense of value.²²

²¹*The Cleveland Daily Plain Dealer*, April 14, 1851.

²²Moore, *In Search of White Crows*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), passim; Bret E. Carroll, *Spiritualism in Antebellum America*,

Tiffany ended his lecture with a pantheistic call for reconciliation between science and spirit. Reason, he claimed, would ultimately show God's presence in all things. "Reason is the first begotten of God and truth is the first born child of immortality. The Age of Reason will be an age of faith in God, not derived from books of ancient or modern date, but derived from the revelation which God has made of himself in his works, and the divine intuitions of an enlightened and purified soul."²³ Tiffany began his lecture in the voice of a scientist discussing electricity and the contraction of muscles, yet he ended it in the voice of a preacher declaring the Age of Reason to be the New Millennium. Tiffany's ideas were new and radical, but like Kane he appealed to values, such as reason, spirit, and progress, that antebellum Americans held sacred. He involved his listeners in an intellectual process which had meaning for them.

* * *

When Tiffany gave his first lectures in April 1851, the arrival of the Fox sisters in Ohio was still a month away, but he and his audiences were both aware that the one element his lectures lacked was a demonstration of the phenomena he claimed to describe. His theory needed experimental proof.²⁴ At that time, some mediums were practicing in Ohio, but most of these were private mediums, unwilling to perform for the general public as the Fox sisters did. Before the sisters arrived, however, another important lecturer made an appearance in Ohio, bringing even greater local attention to the new spiritualist craze.

In the wake of Tiffany's first course of successful lectures, C. Chauncey Burr and his brother Heman descended on Ohio as part of their nationwide anti-spiritualist crusade. Burr, who was motivated by a mixture of distaste for spiritualism and love of large audiences for his lectures, was making a profitable business out of denouncing the raps.

(Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997), 53, 152, 161, *passim*. Carroll deals primarily with Tiffany as an advocate of individual freedom and "Spiritualist Republicanism."

²³*The Cleveland Daily Plain Dealer*, April 14, 1851.

²⁴Moore, *White Crows*, *passim*. Moore's study traces the continued attempt to reconcile spiritualism with the scientific method and acquire scientific and experimental proof of its authenticity.

He claimed to have exposed as frauds all the rappers he had yet witnessed. The *Plain Dealer* first announced that Burr was on his way to Cleveland on April 29. Two days later it observed that Leah Fish was also on her way.²⁵ The build-up could not have been more effective if it had been planned. The citizens of Cleveland would have their chance to judge for themselves when one of the best known spirit-rappers and one of the best known anti-spiritualists arrived in the city almost simultaneously. "So we are to have both sides of this interesting question presented in its full length and breadth," announced the *Plain Dealer*. "Afraid of no truth, we shall patronize both sides, and report progress to the people."²⁶

On Monday, May 5, Burr began his course of lectures. "Rochester Knockings Explained!" announced his advertisement in the *Plain Dealer*, appearing just under another for a performance of Shakespeare's "Richard the Third."

C. Chauncey Burr will give his Lectures on Popular Delusion and Spiritual Rappings, at the

MELODEON HALL

on Monday, Tuesday, and Wednesday evenings, May 5th, 6th and 7th. He will be assisted by HEMAN BURR who will exhibit the whole wonderful phenomena of the Rochester Rappings, and who will produce the exact
"Mysterious Sounds,"

so loud that they will be distinctly heard by the whole audience.

He will also exhibit the secret of the "*Bewitched Tables*," and every part of the rapping imposition will be exhibited to the perfect comprehension of the whole audience.

Mr. Burr has spent three months investigating the rappings - he has detected forty seven "Mediums" - he has discovered seventeen different ways by which Mediums in different places, produce the sounds.

Admission 12 1/2 cents. Lecture to commence at 7 1/2 o'clock.²⁷

Like Kane and Tiffany, Burr presented knowledge in terms of values. His lectures focused on the moral degradation caused by spiritualism. He presented the spirit-rapping as mere fraud and delusion that often led believers to insanity or even suicide. It was, he said, a "disastrous influence on the cause of religion and civilization."²⁸ He also presented himself as the possessor of a rational mind who could see through the deceptive ways of

²⁵*Cleveland Daily Plain Dealer*, April 29, 1851, May 1, 1851.

²⁶*Cleveland Daily Plain Dealer*, May 5, 1851.

²⁷*Ibid.*

²⁸*Cleveland Daily Plain Dealer*, May 6, 1851.

the mediums. But while he attracted large audiences to his lectures, he did not always convince them. People wondered why, if all mediums were frauds, intelligent men like Horace Greeley and the distinguished guests at the "post-mortuum soiree" had not been able to detect it. Burr seemed to arrogantly place his own powers of reason and observation above those of the thousands of others who had also been unable to detect deception. He seemed to deny the people's ability to make reasoned decisions for themselves based upon their own observations, thus challenging the core of the American philosophy.

Joel Tiffany recognized these weaknesses in Burr's approach and, soon after Burr's arrival, issued a challenge which was printed in the *Plain Dealer*.²⁹ Tiffany proposed that he and Burr publicly debate the matter before the people of Cleveland, so that they could make up their minds themselves rather than simply being told what to think by Burr. Burr put off the challenge until his own series of three lectures was done, but on May 8 the debate began. The first night attracted a sizable crowd that the *Plain Dealer* compared with those going to see the immensely popular Swedish soprano, Jenny Lind, then making a triumphant tour of the United States under the skilled management of P.T. Barnum. "There was a tremendous crowd, a full Jenny audience to hear the opening of this discussion last night." read the account the next morning. "The Melodeon, the largest hall in the city, or in the West, was filled to its utmost capacity by the fashion, talent and beauty of the city, and the entertainment was well worthy of their attention."³⁰ The speakers took turns addressing the audience in thirty-minute intervals beginning with Tiffany. Tiffany claimed that genuine spiritual manifestations were not like the tricks reproduced by the Burr brothers. Cleveland as yet had only a few mediums who gave private seances, so most in the audience had not yet experienced the real thing, claimed Tiffany. He proceeded to give examples from newspaper accounts and from his own

²⁹*Cleveland Daily Plain Dealer*, May 6, 1851.

³⁰*Cleveland Daily Plain Dealer*, May 9, 1851.

experiences that, he said, could not be explained by Burr's theories of toe rapping and trickery.

Burr responded by placing the testimony of witnesses in doubt. "I will show you," he informed the audience, "that there is no limit to mental impressibility."³¹ Eyewitnesses could be fooled. They could be led to believe that they saw things which were not there. This was a disturbing view, not easily accepted by people with a strong faith in human progress. Certainly insane and deluded people could imagine things in this way, but not rational and intelligent men and women. How could a collection of mere girls manipulate the minds of the nation's greatest men? The idea was absurd. Then, in a comment not well designed to curry the favor of the newspaper reporters present, Burr made reference to the expression "he lies like a newspaper," which, he said, was used in some places to place doubt on a person's veracity. "Newspaper evidence is not always the best kind," he asserted in response to Tiffany's use of testimony recounted in the papers. "If I were to depend upon that alone, I doubt not I could conclusively demonstrate the moon to be made of green cheese."³² Needless to say, the newspapers were not fond of Burr or his argument.

The debate went on for two more nights. The philosophical ideas were intermixed with talk of fraud. Whoever's argument was best, one thing was clear. Burr lost the battle of values by presenting himself as an authority whose perceptions were superior to all others. He came across as arrogant and unlikeable. He placed no value on the people's ability to investigate a phenomenon with their own eyes, ears, and minds. When he and his brother left Cleveland on May 12 the *PlainDealer* commented, "They came with most pompous pretensions, claiming to cast out devils in every place where evil spirits were known to dwell; and supposing this city was inundated with false mediums, and the people

³¹Ibid.

³²Ibid.

a community of fools, incompetent to detect the tricks of the Rappers, they kindly volunteered to enlighten us at one shilling per lecture or 75 cents for the course.”³³

Burr had entertained, but not convinced, the people of Cleveland, because he failed to convince the audience that his debate with Tiffany was about the truth or falsehood of spirit-rapping. If he had, perhaps he would have won. Rather Tiffany successfully thwarted Burr by making the debate about the primacy of spirit over matter and about human reason over authority. By framing the debate in this way, Tiffany won. The people of Cleveland chose spirit and a faith in human reason over talk of trickery and expert authority.

* * *

Two days later, Leah Fish arrived in Cleveland ready to build upon this free publicity. She arrived on May 14 with a small contingent including Calvin Brown and her married sister, Maria Smith, but not the two younger Fox sisters. Fish, as usual, did not shy away from confrontation when she reached Cleveland. Hearing that Burr had referred to her as “a woman of notoriously bad character,” she promptly sued him for slander, claiming damages of ten thousand dollars.³⁴ The editors of the *Plain Dealer*, who had grown to dislike Burr, reported this with unabashed glee, adding that Mrs. Fish was now at the Dunham House Hotel, where she would receive visitors twice daily.³⁵

In the wake of the excitement generated by the lectures of the previous weeks, Fish did a brisk business in Cleveland. Twelve days after her arrival, the *Plain Dealer* reported increasing crowds at the Dunham House, including “several distinguished gentlemen and their ladies from distant parts of the state.”³⁶ A few days later she was joined by Maggie and Kate Fox, who until recently had been staying at a private residence in New York City. They had come to Cleveland accompanied by a friend from Rochester, Mrs. Kedzie.

³³*Cleveland Daily Plain Dealer*, May 12, 1851

³⁴There is some question whether Leah Fish sued Burr herself or if Joel Tiffany, who was also a lawyer, sued him on her behalf.

³⁵*Cleveland Daily Plain Dealer*, May 15, 1851.

³⁶*Cleveland Daily Plain Dealer*, May 26, 1851.

planning to move on to Cincinnati, but, instead, they stayed for a time in Cleveland. Together the three sisters attracted plenty of attention, but they did not limit themselves to private sittings at the Dunham. They also allied their performances with the efforts of Joel Tiffany. Rather than mounting the podium as speakers themselves, however, they took their seats in Tiffany's audience. While Tiffany lectured one day at the Prospect Street church, the crowd was delighted to hear raps responding throughout the church to what was being said. When Tiffany made a point the spirits liked, they reacted with raps of approval. Performance and philosophy were thus effectively combined, each lending credence to the other. Throughout their Ohio tour, the Fox sisters frequently accompanied Tiffany to towns where he would give a learned lecture on spirit and matter while they performed raps to prove what he was saying. They maintained their decorum as genteel young ladies by giving the more controversial public role to Tiffany, so that they could remain passive, thus respectable, objects.³⁷

* * *

The Fox sisters and their supporters may have won the battle over values in the lecture halls of Cleveland, but by the end of their western tour in late 1851 changes were coming over the spirit rapping phenomena that would push the Fox sisters to the sidelines of the movement and reduce Maggie Fox's willingness to take part in it. A growing segment of the American population had made up their minds on the matter, and many were coming around to the view held by Chauncey Burr. Consider, for example, diarist George Templeton Strong of New York City, whose journal entry for July 8, 1850, when the sisters first visited New York, was all about the raps. He did not believe they were spiritual, but they were worth two visits to see and hear them along with a quantity of speculation on the matter. By May 1852, he had become a confirmed skeptic who viewed the spiritualist antics with some distaste. He was still interested, but now his interest was

³⁷Underhill, *Missing Link*, 228; *Cleveland Daily Plain Dealer*, August 4, 1851, August 30, 1851.

in the "human credulity" the rapping demonstrated, and he attributed the work of one prominent spiritualist as "a vivid waking dream produced by opium, drink, and mental excitement." Strong continued to believe the rappings should be investigated, but not because he thought there was any chance of their being of spiritual origin; rather they demonstrated the human potential for delusion. To an ever increasing segment of the population, spirit-rapping now represented the uglier side of human life - not progress, but degradation.³⁸

Spirit-rapping was developing a reputation among many non-believers as a sign of serious social and moral decline. Maggie and Kate Fox were of course personally affected by this view. It gave them an increasingly unappealing notoriety among non-spiritualists. As time went by, fewer editors of the nation's newspapers approached spirit rapping as Horace Greeley and John Grey had, as an opportunity for serious democratic investigation and discussion, or a sign of American progress. Rather, they alternately condemned and ignored the rapping and rappers. Even Greeley began to withdraw from his earlier interest in the rappings, although he never wholly rejected them as fraud.³⁹

Two new topics emerged in the newspapers in 1851 and 1852 concerning spirit-rapping: insanity and suicide. Rather than the questions of truth or falsehood that dominated early discussion in the papers, now editorials and articles raised questions about the moral ramifications of spirit-rapping. For instance, in March 1853, in an editorial, the *Daily National Intelligencer* bewailed spirit-rapping as a delusion, out of place in an age of progress and reason. "We had resolved never again to burden these columns with the disgusting theme;" the editorial read, "but it seems to become a journalist's duty to give 'line upon line and precept upon precept,' since the imposture is still marring domestic

³⁸George Templeton Strong, *Diary of George Templeton Strong; The Turbulent Fifties, 1850-1859*, Allan Nevins and Milton Halsey Thomas eds., (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1952), 15-16, 93, 119, 125.

³⁹Horace Greeley, *Recollections of a Busy Life*, (New York: J. B. Ford & Co., 1868), 234-241.

happiness and filling our madhouses with its victims.”⁴⁰ Spiritualism, according to this editorial, preyed upon the weak-minded, destroyed families, and sent countless victims to the asylums. At about the same time, a lecturer speaking in Richmond, Virginia presented precise figures supporting this view. To date, throughout the United States, he said, 573 people had been sent to asylums because of spirit-rapping, while seventeen had committed suicide.⁴¹

In the face of growing public disapproval and ridicule, dedicated spiritualists were consolidating within their own organizations. A growing core of spiritualists had now joined private spiritualist circles that met regularly; they read about spiritualist matters in new spiritualist newspapers and went to spiritualist conventions to exchange their views on the new religion. Joel Tiffany would eventually become the editor of his own spiritualist journal. But in the mainstream newspapers and lecture halls, where Tiffany had once triumphed, spiritualism was losing ground.

To non-believers, spiritualism was increasingly seen to bring out the worst in American society. It demonstrated how easily respectable men and women could be guided into delusion. It showed that perhaps the citizens of the United States were not capable of making rational decisions or of living outside of the control of authority. Spiritualism had entered an American milieu dedicated to the rational exchange of ideas. This was a milieu of newspapers and lecture halls whose very existence was based on a belief that, if citizens were given information and allowed to debate issues freely, then truth and reason would ultimately prevail. Yet, in the case of spiritualism, truth and reason were showing no sign of prevailing any time soon. Spirit-rapping was increasingly making a strong case *against* the idea that a nation could be ruled by human reason. To many, it represented moral and intellectual decline in an age devoted to progress.

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⁴⁰*Daily National Intelligencer* (Washington, D.C.), March 19, 1853.

⁴¹*Daily National Intelligencer* (Washington, D.C.), March 14, 1853.

By the middle of 1852, Elisha Kane and Margaret Fox had not yet met, but they already had a great deal in common. They both appealed to American audiences who linked their desire to learn about unknown worlds with their sense of values. Kane's career was taking off because he tapped into the public's sense of wonder at the same time that he appealed to their admiration for humanitarian sacrifice. Fox's career, however, had reached a plateau. To true believers her rappings still represented the progress of a new age and a reconciliation between spirit and matter and between science and religion. To many rapping still appealed to democratic values of independent minded investigation. But, unlike Kane whose reputation would continue to grow, Fox would soon find herself loosing the esteem of the American mainstream.

CHAPTER SIX

PRIVATE LIVES AND PUBLIC CURIOSITY

“How disgusting is this life, to be discussed by the papers! I need not be so proud, Maggie, for I am no better than the ‘rappers.’”

Elisha Kane to Maggie Fox,
The Love-Life of Dr. Kane

When Elisha Kane and Margaret Fox finally got to know one another in the Autumn of 1852, the values associated with their respective explorations into “other worlds” helped define the nature of their private relationship. For Fox, who was aspiring to middle-class status, it was becoming increasingly difficult to reconcile a career as a public celebrity with a respectable private life. Women in antebellum America (at least those who could afford to be) were considered private creatures. Ideals of “domesticity” and the “private sphere” dominated middle-class female life. But Fox did not live in a domestic or private world. She may have mimicked the middle-class domestic scene when she gave seances in hotel parlors, but a parlor in a hotel is far from the parlor of a middle-class home. Maggie Fox was an extremely public woman. That in itself brought a degree of notoriety. Even if spirit-rapping had not been quickly becoming notorious by 1852, Maggie Fox would have faced censure from the more genteel levels of the middle-class.

Surprisingly, Kane, too, felt ill at ease with the public aspect of his career. While he actively sought a public reputation, he was uncomfortable about the idea of being observed and talked about by strangers. There was something generally abhorrent about publicity. Even though Kane took advantage of publicity as best he could, at times the arrogant elitist in him rebelled against this need to appeal to the public with his science. Kane, however, was a man of some stature, so he was supposed to lead a public life.

Kane needed to generate publicity if he wanted to continue with a career as a Polar explorer. During the winter of 1851-52, when he was not lecturing, Kane worked on his book and corresponded with Lady Franklin and Henry Grinnell about a new expedition for the summer of 1852. In February, Grinnell again offered the navy the use of his two ships and suggested that Congress add to them a ship equipped with a steam driven propeller and a store ship manned by navy officers and men.¹ Grinnell wanted to see a proper, government-sponsored expedition, but Congress was not enthusiastic about such schemes and did not act.

Kane quickly realized that they could not rely wholly on government support and began considering a smaller, privately funded venture. He was convinced that Franklin had gone north through Wellington Channel into an Open Polar Sea, but since Wellington Channel was so often blocked by ice all summer, he proposed to take a small group of men to break through to the Open Polar Sea by way of Smith Sound, to the north of Baffin Bay, well east of Wellington Channel. He thought that a small party with boats, sledges, and dogs could make their way north by this route.

In May, he was encouraging Henry Grinnell to send for the British whaling captain, William Penny, who Kane thought should command the expedition, perhaps in conjunction with himself.² Kane's plan of search differed in significant ways from those conducted in the past. The British tradition was to send large ships on exploring expeditions with large crews under strict Naval discipline and laden with years of provisions.³ Kane's idea was to travel with a small party that could partially live off the land. Instead of a disciplined navy crew, he wanted to travel with a team of enthusiastic comrades without "an artificial discipline." "All that is needed," he told Grinnell, "is a crew of proper moral material, controlled by prudence and decision, and made aware

¹Henry Grinnell to EKK, February 11, 1852, EKK Papers; *Public Ledger* (Philadelphia), February 18, 1852.

²EKK to Henry Grinnell, May 7, 1852.

³Pierre Berton, *The Arctic Grail: The Quest for the North West Passage and the North Pole, 1818-1909*, (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1988);

beforehand of what they had to endure.”⁴ He was also advocating a form of travel that mirrored the Inuit and Native Greenlanders more than the Royal Navy. He wanted to eat seals, dress in furs, and travel over the ice using sledges and dogs.

With his busy lecturing schedule and his efforts to get his book on the first expedition to press, any hope for an expedition during the summer of 1852 fell through, but Kane continued to plan for an expedition to leave in the Spring of 1853. If the expedition was not to be sponsored by the navy, he would need to get support from a variety of sources. He needed to generate enough enthusiasm so that men would volunteer to join the expedition and scientific institutions would lend him instruments. Proceeds from his lectures could go toward buying provisions, and he hoped that, if enough public pressure was exerted on the government, it would at least assign some navy men with navy pay to join the expedition. Eventually, with the financial help of Henry Grinnell and an Englishman named George Peabody, an expedition seemed to be taking shape, but Kane constantly had to move between these different sources of support to keep the whole thing together. This wore down his already fragile health, so, all through the planning process, he went through periodic bouts with illness.⁵

* * *

Meanwhile Margaretta Fox was becoming increasingly dissatisfied with the course of her spirit-rapping career. Despite great success in Ohio, all was not well within the family. Leah Fish was increasingly coming into conflict with her sisters. She wanted to create a new religion with herself in the central role, but Maggie and Kate Fox did not seem to be interested in such matters. They were teenagers more interested in enjoying themselves than propagating a new religion. But even though they liked to have fun with

⁴EKK to Henry Grinnell, May 7, 1852.

⁵George Corner, *Doctor Kane of the Arctic Seas*, (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1972), 102-124; Elder, *Biography of Elisha Kent Kane*, (Philadelphia: Childs & Peterson, 1858), 166-186.

the raps, the younger sisters were also becoming increasingly aware of the social stigma connected with their profession.

Bad blood developed between the sisters and included some of their entourage. Mrs. Kedzie, who took Maggie and Kate Fox to Ohio without Fish's prior knowledge, apparently did not get along with Fish. In a letter to Amy Post written at the end of July, Fish complained that Kedzie was making it difficult for her to maintain the proper image. "Mrs. Kedzie's coming out here has caused us much trouble, and the whole affair, i.e., the whole subject of the Spirits was for a time completely sunk - we feared never to arise again. Although she goes to every person she meets and tells them that 'Leah' is not the proper person, a bad manager, extravagant, etc. I believe it is generally allowed by all who know anything about the matter that she is a very improper person, and has no business in the matter except to make a little speculation out of the 'knockings.'"⁶

Maggie and Kate Fox, according to Fish, were little better. Fish felt surrounded by enemies trying to prove her a fraud, and she felt that her sisters were adding to her troubles. "Much of my trouble is caused by the girls," she complained to Amy Post, "who are always planning out something and then if they fail in their calculations, they throw the whole thing upon my shoulders. To be frank with you, I do not know how to bear up under my trials." Besides indicating Fish's conflict with her sisters, her statement seems to acknowledge to Post that Maggie and Kate Fox were engaged with "calculations" in their rappings. She continued, "I can tell you truly if it had not been for them [her sisters], I should never differ with many, but they are always working so underhandedly that I am tired, tired of Life or in other words of so much deception."⁷

This sounds almost like a confession that the rapping was a calculated deception, but it is not. Elsewhere in the same letter Fish told Post that the whole tour of Ohio was a great trial and sacrifice which she was engaging in "for truth's sake."⁸ This letter does not

⁶A. Leah Fish to Amy Post, July 22, 1851, Post Papers.

⁷Ibid.

⁸Ibid.

indicate that Amy Post was aware that spirit-rapping was all fraud, rather it suggests that even dedicated spiritualists, such as Amy Post, by this time knew that Maggie and Kate Fox were not always honest or sincere. Post may have known that the girls often played games with the raps.

Spiritualists were always quick to respond to those who condemned the whole movement after discovering a single deception. They often acknowledged that some deception might exist, but argued that this was not proof that it was all deception. As time went by, and more and more frauds were revealed, spiritualists would often respond by admitting to a degree of deception. There were a few false mediums, they conceded, but the rest were honest. Or they would admit that performing mediums, even when true mediums, often felt pressure to impress skeptics by supplementing real manifestations with more sensational fake ones. Fish's letter to Amy Post may indicate that, by 1851, even many of the most dedicated spiritualists knew that Maggie and Kate Fox sometimes faked their knockings.

During their western tour there was a growing rift between the sisters based upon their differing priorities. Fish was trying to promote a new religion, but Maggie and Kate Fox enjoyed the attention they were getting. They enjoyed the opportunity the raps offered them to travel, stay in nice hotels, and meet some of the country's most famous people, but their own goals often conflicted with the goals of the spiritualists who surrounded them. Sometimes their own personalities would break through, and they would have fun with the raps. This angered Leah Fish, who was old enough to realize the price of exposure.

Kate and Maggie Fox's letters to Amy Post during their time in Ohio do not emphasize the progress of the movement so much as they tell of the famous people they were meeting and their loneliness at being away from home so long. In an undated letter from Cincinnati, probably sent in the fall of 1851, Maggie Fox told Amy Post all about Frederick Douglass, who was also in Ohio at the time lecturing on abolition. Douglass "is

the finest looking gentleman I have seen since I have been in Cincinnati.”⁹ Kate Fox boasts about rapping for the renowned Kentucky abolitionist, Cassius M. Clay, in Cincinnati. “Cassius M. Clay you know is a great man. Of course you know him, he held my feet...” She went on to boast, “Cassius Clay is one of our best friends, (but a great flatterer).”¹⁰

The excitement of meeting all sorts of famous and interesting people was offset by the rootless existence of a traveling performer. “I wish you knew how I felt,” wrote Kate Fox to Post. “Oh so homesick. I want to see you Amy. Dear lady, it is raining fast and makes me feel melancholy, it brings up sad recollections. It makes me think of other days, (when I was happy).”¹¹ The tour through Ohio and other western states, which continued week after week, soon became tiresome to Maggie Fox as well. She wrote to Post, “we are still in Cincinnati. leave for Louisville in two weeks, and as Byron says, I shall leave it without regret, I shall return to it without pleasure.”¹²

As the Fox sisters’ western tour came to an end, they were getting tired of the way rapping was influencing their lives. They were always on display. They were always away from home. While they enjoyed the opportunity spirit-rapping offered them to meet people and feel important, as they reached adulthood, they must have begun to wonder about their futures. Spirit-rapping had given them many opportunities, but as negative attention began to solidify, and as newspapers began to report on insanity and suicide as the result of their rappings, they must have begun to doubt. Spirit-rapping had elevated them to the threshold of the middle-class, but the notoriety they had earned also left them just outside the doors of gentility. Maggie Fox, at least, was looking for an alternative.

* * *

In the late Autumn of 1852, Kane took a break from his efforts organizing his expedition and decided to investigate the “Spiritual Manifestations” which were then being

⁹Margaretta Fox to Amy Post, Wednesday afternoon, Post Papers.

¹⁰Catherine Fox to Amy Post, November, [1851], Post Papers.

¹¹Ibid.

¹²Margaretta Fox to Amy Post, Wednesday afternoon, Post Papers.

demonstrated daily at Webb's Union Hotel in Philadelphia. Perhaps Kane went to Webb's Hotel that day because he had noticed in the papers that some spiritualists and clairvoyants in both America and England claimed to know the whereabouts of Franklin and his crew, but it is doubtful that he took any stock in such reports. Instead, it was probably more as a diversion from work on his book than as a serious investigation that he dropped in to see the "rappers."¹³

Maggie Fox and her mother had arrived in Philadelphia in late November, and Fox was giving demonstrations in the usual manner in a hotel parlor. The rappings by this time were old news, no longer as great a sensation as they had been in New York and Ohio, but many people were still willing to pay a dollar to visit with a Fox sister. It had been over two years since she and her sisters had made a strong impression in Manhattan, and over four and a half since they had first begun the rappings, so by this time all the Foxes were quite proficient at holding seances. The three sisters no longer always traveled together, and for this trip to Philadelphia Maggie Fox was the sole medium, escorted by her mother.

At about 10 o'clock a.m. Elisha Kane looked in on the parlor of Webb's Union Hotel. There were no crowds, indicating that popular interest in the raps was not what it once was. Instead, "seeing a very young lady sitting by the window with a book in her hand, he imagined that he had knocked at the wrong door."¹⁴ The young lady, of course, was Maggie Fox, reading her French lessons, accompanied by her mother. Kane was struck, as other visitors to the spiritual manifestations had been, by the apparent youthful innocence of Miss Fox. She did not look like the deceiver that Kane, as a skeptic, assumed her to be. According to one account, Kane fell in love at first sight, and "his determination was formed on this first interview to make Margaret his wife."¹⁵

¹³*The Love-Life of Dr. Kane*, (New York: Carleton, 1865), 237-239; Alison Winter, *Mesmerized: Powers of Mind in Victorian Britain*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 122-124; *Daily Albany Argus*, April 17, 1850; *Troy Daily Whig*, May 16, 1850; *Albany Daily State Register*, May 16, 1850.

¹⁴*Love-Life*, 23.

¹⁵*Ibid.*, 24.

Whether or not Kane really fell in love at first sight we will never know. The sentimental tendencies of nineteenth-century writers generally dominate descriptions of their affair, but clearly he was smitten with the young spirit-rapper. Like many men who witnessed the raps, he was impressed by Maggie Fox's style, but he was not a believer in spirits. He severely disapproved of rapping as an occupation for a young woman of virtuous character, and quite soon, perhaps even at their first meeting, he determined that it was his responsibility to "rescue" this seemingly innocent young woman from such a disreputable profession.

The following day he returned and told Maggie Fox that she should give up the raps and instead get an education. Soon he became a daily visitor to Webb's Hotel. Often during the remainder of her stay in Philadelphia he invited her to accompany him on carriage rides around town, suitably chaperoned, of course, by Mrs. Fox or one of Kane's aunts. By the middle of December, he was sending expensive gifts and bestowing paternalistic advice.¹⁶

* * *

Most of our knowledge about the relationship and courtship which ensued between Maggie Fox and Elisha Kane comes from a little book, published nearly ten years after Kane's death, called *The Love-Life of Doctor Kane*. This book was authorized by Maggie Fox and contains an account of her relationship with Kane, as well as copies of love letters reportedly written by him to her. The authenticity of these letters is, of course, a matter of debate; no originals of the letters printed in *The Love-Life* have been located. Like much of Fox's life, her relationship with Kane is full of controversy and conflicting accounts. During Kane's lifetime, the two were linked by rumor and various accounts in the newspapers, some of which said they were engaged, while others denied that any engagement existed. Despite such rumors, Kane's family always denied that he married Fox or that his relationship with her was motivated by anything other than a philanthropic

¹⁶Ibid., 28-30.

desire to educate her and to save her from a disreputable career. Fox, on the other hand, claimed that they were in love, and that, near the end of Kane's life, the two of them had been secretly married.

The surviving evidence suggests that Fox's version is closest to the truth. While the original love letters have not survived, plenty of evidence indicates that they did once exist. Perhaps the most compelling evidence is the effort the Kane family made to acquire these letters to prevent them from ever being published. There is also definitive evidence in Kane's papers indicating that he engaged in a secret correspondence with Fox, often through his friend Cornelius Grinnell, the son of Henry Grinnell who was financing Kane's expedition.¹⁷ The relationship between Fox and Kane definitely existed and was clearly romantic, even though her claim that an actual marriage had taken place could be an embellishment. Whether Kane actually married Maggie Fox or intended to marry her, he led her to believe that he would marry her, while at the same time he kept the true nature of his relationship with her secret from his family. Fox had little incentive to make the whole thing up. The letters reproduced in *The Love-Life of Dr. Kane* are in Kane's style, and facsimiles are reproduced in his handwriting. The paternalistic advice and arrogant and often condescending manner he takes in these letters is in keeping with the tone he took with many whom he thought to be his social inferiors, and there is a limited, yet significant, quantity of independent evidence which supports the account of the relationship recounted in the *Love-Life*. There were many people, who were in a position to know the truth, who could have renounced *The Love-Life*, had it been a complete fraud, but none did, with the exception of the Kane family.¹⁸

Another convincing bit of evidence in support of the authenticity of *The Love-Life* is that the book was almost certainly compiled by Elizabeth Fries Ellet, a prolific nineteenth-century author, best known for her histories of American women. As an

¹⁷ Cornelius Grinnell to EKK, January 31, 1853, February 2, 1853, (Thursday), EKK Papers.

¹⁸ This will all be discussed in greater detail in Chapter Ten.

historian and biographer, Ellet strove for accuracy, even if her style was often sentimental. Though *The Love-Life* was written and edited anonymously, correspondence in the Elisha Kent Kane papers and Robert Patterson Kane papers clearly indicate that Ellet prepared it and was the driving force behind its publication.¹⁹

* * *

For six months, between their first encounter in Web's Union Hotel and Kane's departure for the Arctic at the end of May, he and Fox engaged in an unusual courtship as they pursued their respective public careers in the cities of the eastern United States. Sometimes Kane played the role of the ardent suitor, while at other times he was the stern paternalist lecturing to her on proper decorum and behavior. During December and January, while Fox and her mother remained in Philadelphia, Kane made frequent visits, sitting in on public séances and taking her on carriage rides. During this time his notes to her are characterized by strict formality. "My Dear Miss Fox:" he wrote in one typical note. "The day is so beautiful that I feel tempted to repent my indoor imprisonment. If you will do me the kindness to change your own mind, and take a quiet drive, I will call for you at your own hour."²⁰ Other invitations were directed to Mrs. Fox, who often accompanied them.

Kane was careful to observe proprieties. One day Fox invited him into a room at the hotel to see a cake someone had sent her. When he saw that the room had a bed in it, he recoiled and gave her a lecture on "the impropriety of inviting a gentleman to pass through a sleeping apartment."²¹ She began to call him "The Preacher" for his habit of

¹⁹ See especially, Mrs. E.F. Ellet to J.P. Green, "in re R.P. Kane, M. Fox dispute," n.d. [circa 1862-1866] Robert Patterson Kane Papers, American Philosophical Society Library; Margaret Fox to Mrs. Ellet, n.d., EKK Papers. Though well-known in her time, there is very little historical work on Elizabeth Ellet. The best source is Scott Casper, *Constructing American Lives: Biography & Culture in Nineteenth-Century America*, (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1999), 158-178. See also "Elizabeth Fries Ellet," *Notable American Women*, 569-570.

²⁰*Love-Life*, 27-27.

²¹*Ibid.*, 50.

lecturing to her on morals and etiquette. His goal seemed to be to reclaim the young spirit-rapper for a life as a genteel member of the middle-class, yet her association with spiritualism made it hard for him to do so.

Fox did not, at first, encourage Kane's advances, but she clearly enjoyed his company. Perhaps she was intrigued at this man who believed her raps a fraud, yet who seemed interested in knowing her nonetheless. Many who met Fox at this time commented that she possessed unusual self control, learned from years as a public medium. She was not about to reveal her innermost being to Kane the moment he walked in the door and expressed an attraction. Unfortunately we do not have very much of her own account of her initial acquaintance with Kane.

In the years leading up to meeting Kane, Maggie Fox had met many gentlemen, like him, of a class distinctly superior to her own. Most were well behaved, but Fox's position in society was very ambiguous. She was a professional woman in an era when such women were unheard of. Her profession catered to the middle class, but she was not of that class herself. In some ways her role as a medium resembled that of an actress or even a prostitute, providing an evening's entertainment for a price. The ambiguous and somewhat notorious nature of her profession invited rude and unwelcome flirtations from poorly behaved or drunk men, which she fended off by remaining polite, yet distant and aloof, during seances. Each of the Fox sisters were careful to put forward a very reserved demeanor, remaining always the passive "medium" as a way to deflect attention from herself.

Kane's advances, however, were neither rude nor overtly flirtatious; rather, his attentions were, on the surface, highly paternalistic. Despite his democratic pretensions, as he aged, Kane developed a strong paternalistic streak which showed itself whenever he dealt with those he thought of as his social inferiors. From the start, Dr. Kane felt free to inform Miss Fox about all her faults, especially the unsuitability of her profession. One

day, early in their relationship, he handed her a note while she was performing a séance. It was a poem that he wrote about her rapping:

Now thy long day's work is o'er,
Fold thine arms across thy breast;
Weary! weary is the life
By cold deceit oppressed.²²

As he got to know her better, he lectured to her about proper decorum and gave her advice about how to dress and behave in a manner becoming to a lady. This was all with the ultimate goal, according to the editor of *The Love Life of Dr. Kane*, of remaking her into a suitable wife for a young man with great prospects. According to this account, Kane had promised, as early as the middle of January 1853, to marry Fox. But he insisted that first she had to give up the rappings and get an education. "You must not engage yourself to be my wife unless you can give me all your love - your whole heart: unless you can sacrifice for me all other anticipations and prospects."²³ Yet Kane seemed to contradict his professions of devotion and demands for concessions on Fox's part by his unwillingness to publicly acknowledge his feelings. His distaste for spirit-rapping made him unwilling to introduce Fox to his immediate family or acknowledge a relationship with her. Kane found it difficult enough to reconcile his own public celebrity with middle-class notions of gentility, but Fox's reputation was, in his eyes, entirely beyond the limits of the acceptable.²⁴

Fox was clearly flattered by Kane's interest. She had always enjoyed the attentions of famous men, yet she gave him little encouragement at first. Elizabeth Ellet, the editor of the *Love-Life*, observed "that she felt as yet none of the impassioned fervor that marked his attachment to her."²⁵ Understandably Maggie Fox approached this curious courtship with some hesitation. Kane preached to her and demanded that she give up her livelihood, but

²²Ibid., 30.

²³Ibid., 33.

²⁴The importance of "respectability" in antebellum culture is explored by Richard Bushman, *The Refinement of America*.

²⁵*Love-Life*, 34.

his insistence on secrecy undoubtedly put his sincerity into question. Perhaps he was just a wealthy scoundrel, toying with her affections. Later in the winter, while Kane was in New England giving lectures and Fox had returned to New York, he responded to her doubts. "Now to you I am nothing but a cute, cunning dissembler; a sort of smart gentleman hypocrite, never really sincere, and merely amusing himself with a pretty face."²⁶ He blames her suspicion on the dishonesty inherent in her world of spiritualism, yet, as historian Christine Stansell has observed in her work on working class women in New York City at this time, there were plenty of "gentlemen hypocrites" ready to amuse themselves at the expense of working women who lacked any means of protection against mistreatment or sexual exploitation. Fox was right to be cautious.²⁷

Kane himself, despite the lip-service he paid to propriety, was not unfamiliar with the antebellum world of illicit sexuality. Of Kane's sexual life we know very little, but his biographer, George W. Corner, has pointed to two letters from 1846, "with scandalous implications," found among Kane's papers which refer to a nameless woman, J-----, who was pregnant. Kane was apparently arranging for her discrete care during the pregnancy. Corner did not know what to make of these letters. One is from a man who assumed that Kane was the lover of the woman in question and father of the child. This correspondent, who signed himself J.T.L., felt free to tell Kane about "the surest piece of youthful flesh" he had recently encountered while in Richmond. He went on to admonish Kane, saying "what an ardent fool you must be Elisha - I have heard you generally leave a mark on anything which you touch." But Corner observed that there is no other evidence that Kane had fathered an illegitimate child.²⁸

²⁶Ibid., 66.

²⁷Christine Stansell, *City of Women: Sex and Class in New York, 1789-1860*, (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1987), 76-101.

²⁸Corner, *Doctor Kane*, 51-52; "JTL" to EKK February 4, 1846, EKK Papers; C.C. Van Wyck to EKK, May 27, 1846, EKK Papers; EKK to Helen Patterson, May 7, [1846], EKK Papers.

Other letters suggest that Kane, whether or not he fathered an illegitimate child himself, may have been considered by his male friends as someone to turn to when their affairs resulted in unwanted and unplanned pregnancies. He was, after all, a medical doctor, and he had studied obstetrics while in medical school. It is doubtful that, as a Navy surgeon, he practiced much obstetrics, but he would, at least, have known who to go to privately for such help. There is clear evidence that at least one friend turned to him for help in arranging discrete care for a pregnant yet unmarried lover.²⁹ Kane may have signed his letters to Fox, "the preacher," but he was not unfamiliar with the seamier aspects of antebellum life. Still, while his interest in secrecy may suggest as much, it is doubtful that Kane simply wanted to make Fox his mistress. He moralizes too much for that.

Whether or not she considered him a "gentleman hypocrite," it is a wonder that Fox responded at all to Kane's advances, since his letters are filled with rather insulting condescension. While he was in New York trying to publicize his plan for a new Arctic expedition, he wrote to her lovingly, "Maggie dear, you have many traits which lift you above your calling. You are refined and lovable; and, with a different education, would have been innocent and artless;" but, just in case this was too much praise for her, he added, "but you are not worthy of a permanent regard from me. You could never lift yourself up to my thoughts and my objects; I could never bring myself down to yours."³⁰ Perhaps because of such attitudes, Kane never really seemed to reconcile himself to the idea of actually marrying Maggie Fox. Her profession put her too far outside the bounds of respectability. At times he insisted upon an engagement, while at other times he seemed on the verge of breaking off the relationship.

Maggie's interest in Elisha, (or Ly as she began to call him) despite his arrogance and insults, may have been an indication of her growing dissatisfaction with her life as a spirit-rapper. In 1852, she was nineteen and thinking about her future. Would she rap for

²⁹Robert Patterson Kane to EKK, November 12, 1846, EKK Papers; Indenture contract, "Miscellany #5," EKK Papers.

³⁰*Love-Life*, 48.

the rest of her life, traveling from city to city and living in hotels? Kane undoubtedly tapped into these concerns. He represented a world apart from the rapping - an alternative to a life of deception and delusion. Kane's voice joined the chorus in the popular press that was increasingly condemning the rappings as immoral and dangerous. The relationship between these two became a private reflection of the public debates. Spirit-rapping had elevated her, but it left her several steps away from the true middle-class respectability she aspired to. A marriage to Kane, on the other hand, would offer her solid membership in the most respectable level of the upper-middle-class.

In January 1853, after a little more than a month in Philadelphia, Maggie Fox and her mother returned to New York City, where her sisters Leah and Kate were living. The year before, soon after returning from Ohio, Fish had rented a brownstone on West Twenty-sixth Street where she was making a good living giving séances.³¹ Leah Fish (now Leah Brown, having married Calvin in September) apparently had little regard for Doctor Kane and his attempts to draw her sister away from spiritualism, so when Kane visited New York he tried to arrange secret meetings with Fox away from the house and Brown's watchful eye. Leah Fish Brown had done well for herself with spirit rapping in a way her sisters never would. She had the strong personality and will necessary to go her own way and to flout convention, and she hoped that her younger sister could do the same.³² In many ways Brown was wiser than either of her sisters. She had been a wife, and she had been a single mother. Spirit-rapping was the best thing that had ever happened to her, so she was able to withstand the disapproval of many rather than give it up. Her sisters, however, knew only spirit-rapping.

While Fox stayed at Brown's on West Twenty-sixth Street, Kane was often in New York promoting his plan for a new Arctic expedition for the spring of 1853. Another

³¹Underhill, *Missing Link*, 251-252; *Love-Life*, 51.

³²Of the three Fox sister, Leah best fits Ann Braude's description of a woman empowered by involvement with spiritualism, but even she eventually solidified her advancement with an advantageous marriage and gave up rapping.

winter brought another lecture season for Kane. In December 1852 he gave an important lecture before the American Geographical and Statistical Society in Manhattan, presenting his plans for a renewed search for Franklin, and then in January he was back lecturing at the Smithsonian and the Maryland Institute in Baltimore. Henry Grinnell lived in New York, so Kane often came there to consult with him and look over preparations for the new expedition which was to leave from New York Harbor.³³

At the beginning of February 1853, he wrote to Fox that he was on his way to New York after his Washington and Baltimore lectures. "Write me how I can see you if I come to New York. How can I meet you, dear Maggie, away from suspicion, away from Mrs. [Brown]. Do you ever walk out alone?" The editor of the *Love Life* explains Kane's desire for secrecy on his competition with the Spiritualists for Fox's time and his wish to conceal his relationship with her from his friends.³⁴ Around the same time he set up a rendezvous with both Fox sisters at Satler's Cosmoramas on Broadway, where he hoped they could meet "without exciting the suspicions of - you know who."³⁵ "You know who" was Leah Fish Brown, who Kane was now calling "The Tigress."³⁶ This is an aspect of *The Love Life of Dr. Kane* that can be confirmed independently. Letters in Kane's personal papers between him and Cornelius Grinnell, the son of Henry Grinnell, refer to a private correspondence with Fox conducted without Leah Brown's approval. When he was not in New York, Kane sent the younger Grinnell (who was about Kane's age) to visit the seances conducted at Mrs. Brown's house and pass notes surreptitiously to Fox.

Cornelius Grinnell wrote Kane of his first visit to Mrs. Brown's house. He did not meet Maggie Fox, "but her sister Kate came to the door, and I gave her the letters. She said she would hand them to her sister. have I done right?" Later he adds, "I had hard work to

³³The new expedition was also funded in part by an Englishman named George Peabody.

³⁴*Love Life*, 52.

³⁵*Ibid.*, 54.

³⁶Cornelius Grinnell to EKK, January 31, 1853, EKK Papers.

deliver the notes, as the old wretch [Brown] kept a sharp look out upon me.”³⁷ Grinnell had some fun attending seances, “in company with several gentlemen,” in order to deliver his friend’s notes. He found them an entertaining diversion, telling Kane, “I have been several times to Mrs. Brown’s ‘promiscuous circles’ as she terms them, that is, not private. One meets there a most singular collection of individuals, enthusiasts and skeptics, old and young and other like myself, who go there for amusement. I have had some capital fun.”³⁸ He also met Fox and was impressed. In early February he wrote Kane: “Your last letter for Miss Maggie was safely delivered to her. She is a very interesting girl. Quite out of place where she is now.”³⁹ Kane responded with a letter referring to his interest in Maggie Fox as a temporary weakness and expressing concern that she is “shut up with that Devil of a sister.”⁴⁰ It is unclear what Kane told Grinnell about his relationship with Fox, but it is clear he did not suggest he was thinking of marrying her. With Grinnell it was apparently acceptable to play the “gentleman hypocrite.”

* * *

Around the middle of February 1853, Kane went on a lecture trip to New England while Fox, with her mother and Kate, went to rap in Washington. As usual, we do not have much of Fox’s side of the correspondence, but Kane, at this time, was clearly wrestling with his attraction to a woman he found beneath him intellectually and socially. He scolded and advised her. “How does Washington come on? Many Beaux? Many believers? Many friends? Answer these questions, you wicked little Maggie!” He hopes to raise her up to his level by lecturing to her on gentility. Later in the same letter, he advises “Never venture out in Washington except in the very best company. If you can get a real gentleman, grab him; but have nothing to do with the vulgar members of Congress.” Then he moves on to the role of wardrobe advisor. “Wear your undersleeves and spencer

³⁷Cornelius Grinnell to EKK, (Thursday), EKK Papers.

³⁸Cornelius Grinnell to EKK, January 31, 1853, EKK Papers.

³⁹Cornelius Grinnell to EKK, February 2, 1853, EKK Papers.

⁴⁰EKK to Cornelius Grinnell, (n.d.) EKK Papers, (misfiled as EKK to Henry Grinnell).

always when you have company. I sent a rich ladylike set for morning wear, and another Honiton lace for evening occasions. Do wear them, Maggie, and tell Kate that as soon as I get back to Philadelphia, I will send her a real appliquée.”⁴¹

He also began to accuse her of not loving him as he loved her, and at times he affected the role of the wise older brother rather than the suitor, trying to make her appreciate him more. At one point, feeling unappreciated, he threatened her: “Unless you love me I will soon cease to love you.”⁴² At this point they had known each other only a little more than two months, so Fox was keeping her options open, but Kane’s advice often was delivered with threats that he would cut off relations if she did not do as he asked. At some point in late February or March, she wrote him a flirtatious letter, encouraging him, but not succumbing to his demands for total submission to his will. She told him a story about getting lost in Washington. When she finally found her way back to her boarding house she met a male acquaintance who “insisted upon it that no young lady could ever lose her way in Washington unless she had some *‘affaire du coeur.’*” Then she went on to tease Kane. “I did not deny the charge. Doctor, there is a rumor - so the General tells me - that you and I are to be married before you go to the Arctic.” Knowing Kane’s obsession with his reputation and his insistence on secrecy, she must have meant this as a jab at him and as a response to all his critiques of her. She then told him of a young French gentleman who flirted with her at a seance.⁴³ Kane may have been insisting that Fox submit to his will, but the few letters of hers printed in the *Love Life* show that she did not entirely accept his view of affairs. While he was always ready to tell her how lucky she was to have him, and how far above her he was, she in turn wanted to make it clear that she had other options.

Yet some of Kane’s lectures hit home. If he did not always express himself with the most tact, he clearly had what he thought was Fox’s best interest at heart. He reminded her that, while spirit-rapping would be fun for a time, it would sour with age. In a letter

⁴¹*Love-Life*, 64.

⁴²*Ibid.*, 67.

⁴³*Ibid.*, 68-69.

addressed to Kate. (to make Fox jealous?) but clearly designed for Maggie Fox's eyes, he wrote of the often unscrupulous behavior of some mediums, then continued with what was probably an accurate assessment of the sisters' position:

Now, Katy, although you and Maggie never go so far as this, yet circumstances must occur where you have to lacerate the feelings of other people. I know that you have a tender heart; but practice in anything hardens us. You do things now which you would never have dreamed of doing years ago; and there will come a time when you will be worse than --; a hardened woman, gathering around you victims of a delusion. Think of that Katy!

The older you grow the more difficult it will be to liberate yourself from this thing. And can you look forward to a life unblessed by the affections, unsoothed by the consciousness of doing right! For you, no innocence with the blessings of a kindly home is now in store. When your mother leaves this scene can you and my still dear Maggie be content to live that life of constant deceit? Do, dear Katy, think of all this!⁴⁴

Dr. Kane may have been right in his diagnosis of the effect prolonged exposure to spirit-rapping would have on Kate and Maggie Fox, but his prescription was less than satisfying. The alternative to the degradation of spirit-rapping, in Kane's eyes, was a return to the traditional role of wife and mother. In Fox's case this meant submission to his will. If she gave up spirit-rapping, if she got an education, if she learned how to dress and behave in a genteel way, then Dr. Kane might continue to love her.

Kane was well aware, from his own experience, of the problems of a public life. The constant need to perform for other people seemed in conflict with accepted notions of virtuous behavior. He found it troublesome, yet bearable, in his own life to be the object of public curiosity, but for a young woman like Maggie Fox it was unacceptable. It would make her unlovable.

Kane struck a nerve. Fox wrote back with more affection than usual, expressing her love. "Should we never again meet in this world we will in another," she reassured him. "Then you will know I have loved you, and love you still."⁴⁵ But this was not enough for Kane. He wrote back that even though she said she loved him, she did not love him enough. He would be, he determined, her friend and protector, but not her lover or

⁴⁴Ibid., 72.

⁴⁵Ibid., 74.

husband. "I saw that you loved me, but not enough. Dear child, it was not in your nature. You would give me everything when near me, but forget me when away. So I made up my mind, and in a moment you became *my friend*."⁴⁶

This state of affairs was not to last. Soon Kane joined the sisters in Washington and the affair was resumed in a more romantic vein. Fox, at this point, seems to have succumbed to Kane's terms. She agreed to give up rapping and to be placed in a school to be "improved" while Kane was away on his Arctic expedition. Still there was no public (or even private, in the case of Kane's family) avowal of an engagement. Kane began to contact friends about placing Fox in a suitable school while he was gone, but he represented himself as a benevolent benefactor rather than a fiancé. He was afraid his relationship with Fox would reach the public gaze.⁴⁷

Kane's actions at this point in the affair begin to appear duplicitous. While he was claiming to be in love with Maggie Fox and intending on marrying her, he also sought to insulate himself from any outside criticism or scandal resulting from a romantic association with a notorious spirit-rapper. He sought to make sure his mother, especially, knew nothing of his association with Fox.

Kane began to contact acquaintances about placing Fox in school during his absence, but he presented himself as a benevolent gentleman not a lover, interested in Fox's welfare from purely disinterested motives. Among those he contacted for advice on an appropriate school for Fox was Francis Hawks. Hawks was eminently respectable. He was an Episcopal clergyman, a lawyer, and an historian. Months before being contacted by Kane he had been offered the post of Bishop of Rhode Island but declined the honor. Kane knew Hawks because Hawks was a founder, with Henry Grinnell, of the American Geographical and Statistical Society and currently its vice-president.⁴⁸ Hawks had been in New York in December when Kane had lectured at the society. Fox also was familiar with

⁴⁶*Ibid.*, 78.

⁴⁷ "Fox - Kane correspondence in re. schooling," EKK Papers.

⁴⁸*Dictionary of American Biography*, Vol. IV, part 2, 416-417.

Hawks, as he had been a guest at her "post-mortuum soiree" at Rufus Griswold's home in June 1850.

Rev. Dr. Hawks gave Kane advice on schools and put him in contact with some other men to consult, but, more importantly, he lent a respectable public cover to Kane's interest in Maggie Fox. Hawks unwittingly explained the cover story in a letter introducing Kane to a Rev. Dr. Croswell of New Haven. "Dr. Kane with other gentlemen here have had their sympathies enlisted in behalf of a young woman," he wrote. "whose story I will leave to the Dr. to tell; and are desirous of placing her at a school where her favorable religious tendencies may be cherished."⁴⁹ Kane also brought in Cornelius Grinnell as an ally, so his actions could be represented as those of a committee of benevolent gentlemen snatching a defenseless young girl from the evil clutches of spiritualism, rather than the actions of a single smitten lover. He wanted it all to seem paternal not personal.⁵⁰

He also sought the advice, on behalf of this committee of benevolent gentlemen, of his aunt Eliza Leiper, who lived in the country-side outside Philadelphia. Leiper recommended placing Fox in the home of a Miss Susannah Turner in Crookville, Pennsylvania. There she could be tutored by Turner and live a retired life, separated from the "bad influences" of the spiritualist circles.⁵¹ With the beneficent support of Dr. Kane and his committee of benevolent gentlemen, Maggie Fox was to be reclaimed. She would be rescued from the clutches of delusion and fanaticism, perhaps someday to become the wife of a respectable man and mother to a brood of respectable children.

Fox consented because she had tired of spirit-rapping. Perhaps she loved Kane, but she did not like the secrecy. At the same time, she had few options and fewer examples to follow. Fox had been propelled far outside the mainstream at an early age. Now she

⁴⁹Francis Hawks to Dr. Croswell, March 26, 1853, "Fox - Kane correspondence in re. schooling," EKK Papers.

⁵⁰EKK to Eliza Leiper, May 1, 1853, EKK to Robert Patterson Kane, June 1853, EKK Papers.

⁵¹Eliza Leiper to EKK, April 7, 1853, EKK to Eliza Leiper, April 11, 1853, EKK to Eliza Leiper, n.d., EKK to Eliza Leiper, May 1, 1853 "Fox - Kane correspondence in re. schooling," EKK Papers.

wanted back in. Kane offered that chance. She wrote to him: "What have I ever done that I should be denied the pleasure of a quiet home, the blessings of love, the reward of virtue?"⁵² These things now appealed to her more than the excitement of rapping.

In late May 1853, as Elisha Kane made final preparations to embark on the most ambitious adventure of his life, Maggie Fox found her own adventures seemingly at an end. By her own consent, she was secluded in the Pennsylvania country-side to be remodeled as a lady. Kane, with his committee of gentlemen, had done to Maggie Fox what many wished they could do to the entire spiritualist movement. They had contained her within the confines of gentility. She started out a willing captive, but she would not remain a contented one.

⁵² Maggie Fox to EKK, "Fox - Kane Correspondence in re. schooling," EKK Papers. This letter is one of a group, tied together with a ribbon, concerning Fox's placement while Kane was gone, all of which support the story that Fox's schooling was being driven by paternalistic sentiments. In another letter, EKK to Robert Patterson Kane, n.d., EKK Papers, Kane tells his brother, "I want to place it in your power documentarily to set me right in case of misrepresentation or false construction reaching dear Mother's ears." The "Fox - Kane correspondence in re schooling" is most likely that to which he was referring. They seem to form a carefully selected collection which would form a documentary alibi in case the story of his interest in Fox went public.

CHAPTER SEVEN

SAILORS, SCIENTISTS, AND STRIFE: THE SECOND GRINNELL EXPEDITION

I was led, by a romantic taste for whatever is strange and marvelous, to visit a region which seemed to be enshrouded in mystery, and which was supposed to contain many scenes and objects that have no counterparts in any other quarter of the world.

William C. Godfrey

In the springtime of 1853, William C. Godfrey, an East River boatman from New York City, engaged himself as a common sailor on board the brig *Advance* bound for the Arctic regions. By his own account, Godfrey's motive for signing on to the latest American Arctic expedition, led by the renowned Doctor Kane, was personal rather than financial. The eighteen dollars a month pay he would receive for the voyage was only a fraction of what he was accustomed to earning at home, but Godfrey joined the expedition out of a love of adventure and a desire to see the world. He had heard of the wonders of the Arctic regions and was determined to see them with his own eyes.¹

Godfrey knew that service on board the *Advance* would not be easy. Most likely he had heard tales of the extreme cold and the constant danger from the Arctic ice, but he had a strong faith in his own ability to endure whatever hardship might lay ahead. He had never before been to sea, but he was a tall and strong young man in his early twenties with a young man's arrogance that he could face whatever the northern regions might subject him to. Later he would admit "that there was something of youthful audacity, somewhat of a restless craving after novelty and change," that led him into this dangerous enterprise.²

¹William C. Godfrey, *Godfrey's Narrative of the Last Grinnell Arctic Exploring Expedition, in Search of Sir John Franklin, 1853-4-5*, (Philadelphia: J.T. Lloyd & Co., 1857), 18-19.

²*Ibid.*, 19-20.

When Godfrey signed on to the Second Grinnell expedition, he put himself under the authority of Elisha Kane - an act that he would later come to regret. Godfrey and Kane were not all that different, despite occupying unequal social positions in America. They were both influenced by a mass culture that promoted inquiry into the mysteries of the universe, and they shared a common desire to travel the world and experience its wonders. They were young and free Americans who saw themselves as part of a new nation based upon progress, equality, and liberty. Having ambition and a thirst for adventure, they saw no limits to what they and their nation could do, but Godfrey and Kane would come into conflict when they learned that, despite their similarities, they had very different ideas about the nature of American freedom and the meaning of authority, class, and status in a democratic nation.

Kane and Godfrey and a small band of men set out with unbridled enthusiasm and camaraderie to explore the unknown regions of the world as free American citizens. In the end they were torn apart by the differences and unresolved questions that still divided both themselves and the society they left behind.

* * *

When Godfrey stepped on board the *Advance*, he met a small band of seventeen volunteers with whom he would spend the following twenty-eight months. All were young men, their average age in the middle twenties. These men enthusiastically looked forward to the upcoming journey and were enjoying the respect and acclaim of their fellow citizens as they prepared the expedition for departure. Many were recent immigrants to the United States. Ordinary seamen George Riley and George Stephenson, and Kane's personal steward, William Morton, were all born in Ireland. Ordinary seaman George Whipple was English, and the cook, Pierre Schubert, was French. Only three of the seamen, including Godfrey, Jefferson Baker, and John Blake (alias William Hussey), were

native-born Americans.³ Perhaps it was because of this connection that Godfrey and Blake soon became friends.

Among the officers, only half were experienced sailors: the rest joined the expedition in scientific capacities. Henry Brooks, who served as first officer, was a skilled Navy boatswain who had been on the first Grinnell expedition with Kane. Executive officer James McGary was an experienced whaler out of New London, used to sailing in Arctic waters, and sailing master John Wilson had served for many years on ships in the Indian Ocean. The carpenter, Christian Ohlsen, was a Dane with plenty of experience at sea. The other officers were landsmen, of the type considered "gentlemen." They were chosen by Kane either for their scientific knowledge or because they were personal acquaintances. Isaac Hayes, who hailed from the Philadelphia area, was surgeon and naturalist; August Sonntag was a German astronomer; Amos Bonsall, a relative of Kane's, was to be the expedition's photographer and part time naturalist; last of all, Henry Goodfellow, a young friend of Kane's from Philadelphia, came along in an unspecified capacity, at times filling the role of an officer and at other times that of a "gentleman passenger."⁴

The make up of the crew of the *Advance* had a great impact upon the progress of the Second Grinnell Expedition. The small group of amateur scientists and mix of seasoned and green sailors came from diverse cultural and economic backgrounds, so the potential was there from the start for problems, especially in the area of discipline. Some, like the seafaring officers, Brooks, McGary, Ohlsen, and Wilson, were used to the discipline and routine of Navy, merchant, or whaling ships. Others, including Godfrey, were unused to the discipline of shipboard life and preferred to consider themselves free American working men, who would do their jobs but show no undue deference to their

³Oscar M. Villarejo, *Dr. Kane's Voyage to the Polar Lands*, (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1965), 11-12; George W. Corner, *Doctor Kane of the Arctic Seas*, (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1972), 125-126.

⁴Villarejo, *Dr. Kane*, 11-12; Corner, *Doctor Kane*, 125-126.

superiors. The young gentlemen, scientists, and friends of Kane's on board most likely assumed that camaraderie, rather than authority, would hold the band of adventurers together. Kane's idea at the start of the voyage was that little in the way of harsh discipline would be required on the voyage. Rather, he expected that he would guide the small band of adventurers like a family, with himself as the benevolent, yet, if need be, severe, paternal figure. Shortly into the journey, in a letter to his parents, he claimed, "thus far we have all the characteristics of a family." Six weeks later he wrote to Cornelius Grinnell "a word about our little family on board ship, for family is the word which I strive to apply to them."⁵ He approached his leadership of these men as he did his relationship with Maggie Fox; he expected to be obeyed because he felt himself to be superior.

At first, camaraderie and enthusiasm for the goals of the expedition did hold the crew together. In May 1853, as the young men came together on board the *Advance*, all was excitement. "It was an exhilarating moment for all on board," recalled Godfrey, "every man of our company, from the commander down to Mons. Schubert, French cook, must have experienced a feeling of expansion for the time being, as though we had all been suddenly enlarged to heroic dimensions."⁶ On May 31, when the expedition departed New York harbor, friends and spectators came out in small boats, and crowds gathered at the Battery to see the expedition off. As the *Advance* left the harbor, "every vessel passed in the Bay gave her a parting cheer, a ringing salute, and shouted good wishes."⁷ Despite the diverse social, economic, and even national background of the little crew, this was an American expedition. The crowd on shore as well as the crew on board felt national pride in the glory of their projected endeavor in distant lands.

On board the brig, excitement soon was put aside in order to face the hard realities of sailing into headwinds on the north Atlantic. Some men who, like Godfrey, were not

⁵EKK to family, June 8, 1853; EKK to Cornelius Grinnell, [misfiled as EKK to Henry Grinnell], July 20, 1853, EKK Papers.

⁶Godfrey, *Godfrey's Narrative*, 31-32,

⁷*The New York Daily Times*, June 1, 1853.

experienced sailors, had to be taught their jobs. But more importantly, "Captain Kane" had to learn how to command a ship. While he had been in the Navy for almost ten years, Kane had never before been in a position of command. It was not a position he took to naturally, although he claimed as much in a letter home little more than a week into the journey. He told his parents, "This trade of authority sits so easily upon me that I feel as if to be toadied was a natural and inevitable province of my particular self."⁸

Still the power he held as commander of a ship troubled him. He was, after all, a firm believer in democratic and egalitarian principles, who had for much of his life rebelled against most arbitrary forms of authority. This was the man who had scoffed at the aristocratic pretensions of the Emperor of Brazil and looked in disgust at the servility of Brazilian laboring classes. As a child, Kane was always quick to rebel against any schoolmaster who seemed to him unfair, and even in the Navy he had been critical of excessive displays of power by his superiors or harsh forms of discipline.⁹ He thought that the severe discipline and corporeal punishment so often dished out on board Navy vessels was a brutal relic of a less democratic era in the past. Now, as a commander, Kane admitted to his loved-ones at home, "I find myself rebelling against the exercise of an artificial power - a disgust at even the necessary despotism of authority - and while a conviction of their necessity comes over me as a sort of sober puzzle - I try every means in my power to diminish and soften down their exercise."¹⁰

What this meant, in some of his officers' eyes, was that he seriously curtailed their control over the crew. He demanded that the officers treat the men civilly, and forbade the use of physical violence against the men.¹¹ He was not willing to give up on the notion of authority altogether. Rather, Kane resolved that his own authority on board the *Advance*

⁸EKK to family, June 8, 1853, EKK Papers.

⁹William Elder, *Biography of Elisha Kent Kane*, (Philadelphia: Childs and Peterson, 1858), 18-28; Corner, *Doctor Kane*, 67-68.

¹⁰EKK to family, June 8, 1853, EKK Papers.

¹¹John Wall Wilson, "Diary," May 18, 1854, American Philosophical Society Library.

would be benevolent and paternalistic. He wanted to be the kindly father figure whose authority stemmed from his own superior knowledge and abilities rather than from his rank, and he expected the men to recognize that and willingly show him respect and deference.

Unfortunately this theory did not always work well in practice. Since he expected respect and submission from his subordinates without demanding it, he eventually came to be seen by them as inconsistent and moody. Sometimes he took the severe tone of a Navy captain, while at other times he acted as a friend and colleague. While this problem would not surface until later in the voyage, it was inherent in the approach he took from the first week of the journey. This problem appears even in his own description of how he exercised his authority. "On deck I am as curt and unbearable as my worst enemy could desire, but if I do see a man or men in a state of reasonable sunshininess I strive hard not to cloud him, and with every one - when I can find the luxury of finding one off duty - I am as free and easy as if on shore - shame to me that I should make a merit of such a confession. So we wear into the harness and so the harness wears into us."¹² Kane sought to be the benevolent and paternal leader of what he referred to as his "family," yet he was never able to successfully attain that status with all the men on board.

William Godfrey, like Kane, was critical of the exercise of arbitrary authority, but his position as a common sailor on board was entirely different. By his own admission, he possessed what he called "a certain inflexibility of disposition, for which Yankees, in all situations, are more or less remarkable."¹³ By this he meant that, as a working class American citizen with egalitarian principles, he rejected the notion of paternalism and refused to show undue submissiveness to what he called the "aristocracy of the brig" who, according to him, expected "as much homage from the sailors as a king could expect to receive from his subjects."¹⁴ Godfrey did what he considered to be his duty on board ship.

¹²EKK to family, June 8, 1853, EKK Papers.

¹³Godfrey, *Godfrey's Narrative*, 62.

¹⁴*Ibid.*, 62.

but refused to be any more humble, submissive, or deferential than he "supposed the exigencies of the service to require."¹⁵ To him, his position on board was defined by a contract. He would receive eighteen dollars a month, and in return he would do his job as a sailor. Elisha Kane was his employer, not his paternal leader.

As this potential discord fermented on board the *Advance*, the brig sailed north to St. Johns, Newfoundland, its first port of call. Here another Irishman, Thomas Hickey, joined the crew as cabin boy, bringing the total number on the expedition to eighteen.¹⁶ At St. Johns, they picked up more supplies and tried to make up any deficiencies in the stores, adding fresh meat and a pack of dogs to their outfit. Kane intended to use these dogs to haul sledges on the journeys he planned to make over the northern ice as far as the Polar Sea.

After Newfoundland, the next port of call was the small community of Fiskernaes in Danish Greenland. Here Kane inquired of the superintendent of the Danish Company, Mr. Lassen, about acquiring a Native Greenlander to join the expedition as a hunter to supply the dogs and men with fresh meat.¹⁷ Lassen recommended a nineteen-year-old local named Hans Christian Hendrik, who, he said, was "an expert with the kayak and javelin."¹⁸ Hendrik joined the expedition in exchange for a supply of provisions, which was left with his mother.¹⁹ He would prove to be one of the expedition's most valuable members.

¹⁵Ibid., 63.

¹⁶Thomas Hickey, *Thomas Hickey's Narrative of the Last Arctic Expedition of Dr. Kane*, (Newark Daily Mercury Office, 1858), 3.

¹⁷The native people of Greenland are popularly known as Eskimo and they are culturally connected with the Inuit of northern Canada. Either Inuit or Native Greenlander is their preferred name, rather than Eskimo.

¹⁸Elisha Kent Kane, *Arctic Explorations: The Second Grinnell Expedition in Search of Sir John Franklin, 1853, '54, '55*, (Philadelphia: Childs and Peterson, 1856), vol. I, 23-24; Hans Hendrik was sometimes called Hans Christian.

¹⁹Kane, *Arctic Explorations*, vol. I, 24; Hans Hendrik, *Memoirs of Hans Hendrik, the Arctic Traveler, Serving under Kane, Hayes, Hall and Nares, 1853-1876*, Dr. Henry Rink, trans., (London: Trubner & Co., 1878,) 22.

Also at Fiskernaes. Kane and Godfrey came into their first open conflict. Godfrey and his new friend, John Blake, according to Kane, "insulted, by what sailors call 'Jaw', a couple of the deck officers." In reaction to this slight Kane felt he needed to teach the disrespectful sailors their place. The other officers, especially Wilson, would have liked to teach Godfrey respect with violence, but Kane decided instead to isolate Godfrey and Blake in a way which would make them think about his misdeeds. So he, "tied them hand and foot, covered them up with warm buffalo robes, and nailed them under the booby hatch."²⁰ Blake and Godfrey were not too quick to submit however. According to Thomas Hickey, while under the booby hatch the two miscreants tapped "a barrel of whiskey, and [passed] the liquor down their throats by means of a straw."²¹ Kane however contended that after four days on bread and water the two "promised to be good boys, and have been since two of our best men."²²

The *Advance* sailed up the coast of Greenland, stopping at more settlements to pick up additional supplies, especially furs and fresh provisions. Eventually they reached Upernavik, the most northern Danish settlement along the west coast of Greenland. Here they picked up the final member of their crew, Carl Petersen, who would be the expedition's interpreter, serving as an officer for thirty dollars a month. Petersen was a Dane, who had resided in Greenland for many years and spoke the language of the Native Greenlanders. As a man in his late thirties or forties, he was older and more experienced than any other member of the expedition. He was a veteran Arctic explorer, having been interpreter on board a British expedition led by Captain William Penny.²³

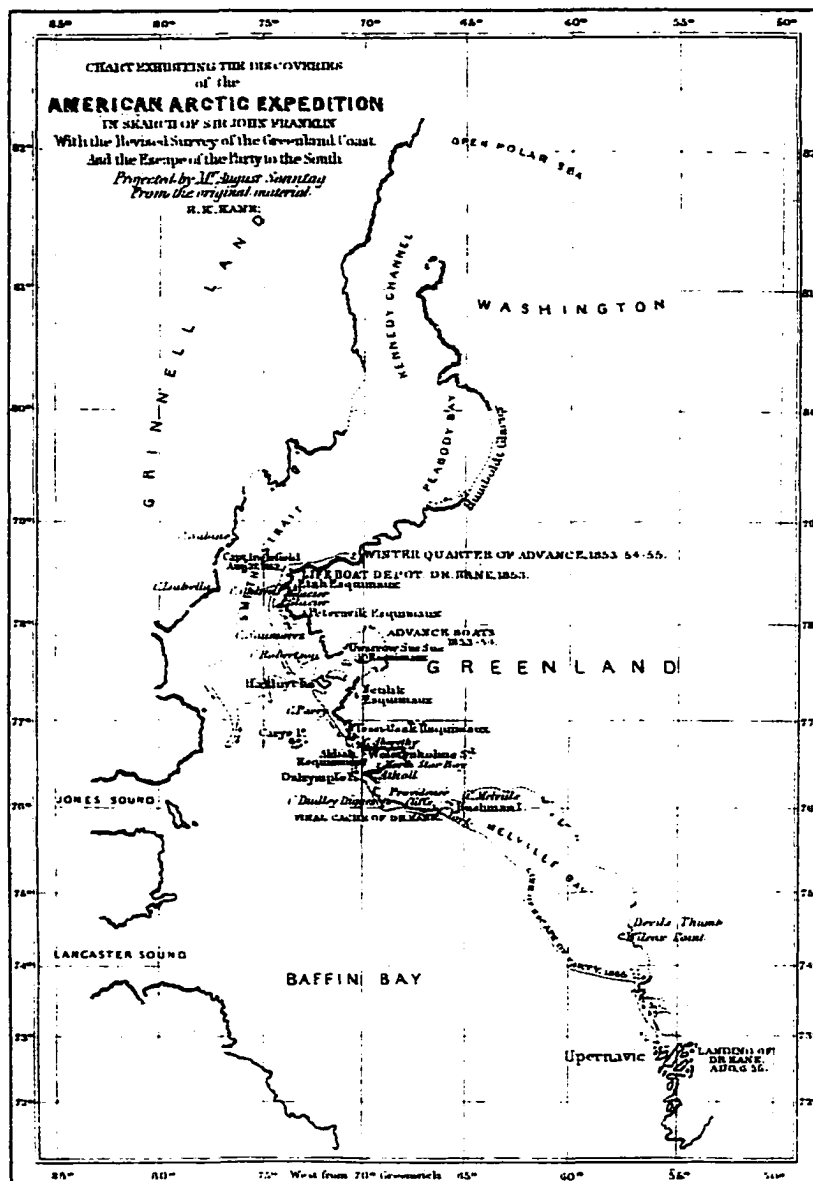
²⁰EKK to Cornelius Grinnell, [misfiled as EKK to Henry Grinnell], July 20, 1853, EKK Papers.

²¹Thomas Hickey, *Thomas Hickey's Narrative of the Last Arctic Expedition of Dr. Kane*, (Newark: Newark Daily Mercury Office, 1858), 4. Copy found in the New York Historical Society collection.

²²EKK to Cornelius Grinnell, [misfiled as EKK to Henry Grinnell], July 20, 1853, EKK Papers.

²³*Ibid.*

Figure 7



Map of the Second Grinnell Expedition. *Arctic Explorations.*

Perhaps because of this experience, Petersen was critical of his new comrades and the expedition in general. Soon after consenting to join, he noted several deficiencies. The ship's provisions, he thought, had too much salted and not enough boiled meats. The crew, he felt, was too small and not experienced enough, and the commander was inexperienced, yet unwilling to take the advice of his more knowledgeable subordinates. Petersen, as a Dane, found the nationalistic pride and bonhomie that Kane tried to instill in the crew distasteful and seemed not to take much stock in the belief in an "Open Polar Sea" that guided the expedition. Indeed it is surprising that Petersen consented to join the expedition at all. As it was, he added some important skills and experience to the small band of explorers, but at the same time he never accepted, and at times undermined, the authority of the expedition's leader. Petersen's presence eventually helped bring to the surface many of the latent divisions in the crew.²⁴

With the expedition's crew and stores now complete, the *Advance* sailed north once more. Kane's plan was to drive straight north to try to find a passage through Smith Sound and hopefully force a passage past all of the ice to the open water he imagined lay beyond. If the brig could not get through, he intended to find a suitable harbor and allow the *Advance* to become frozen into the ice for the winter. The crew could then use the dogs and sledges to reconnoiter to the north, map the coastline, and make astronomical and other scientific observations during the winter, before completing a passage through to the Open Polar Sea the following spring. This is exactly what he proceeded to do, the only major flaw to his plan being that the intended destination that they were risking everything to achieve did not in fact exist. Instead of breaking through the barrier of ice to a warmer region beyond, their surroundings just kept getting colder and icier.

* * *

²⁴Carl Petersen, *Dr. Kane's Voyage to the Polar Lands*, Oscar M. Villarejo ed., (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1965), 57-60.

By the end of July, Kane and his crew were in Melville Bay, heading North towards Smith Sound. Navigation was a matter of finding a route through shifting fields of ice without getting crushed between them. When the weather turned rough, they often fastened the *Advance* to icebergs for a tenuous form of security, using these huge floating islands of ice as protection from the churning sea of pack ice around them. Often, when the pack ice drifted south toward the Atlantic, the icebergs, whose massive submerged portions reacted to currents well below the surface, remained stationary or even drifted north. Attaching a small brig to an iceberg, however, could prove dangerous, as they discovered on July 29 when the iceberg they were moored to split apart. Kane recalled, "we had barely time to cast off before the face of the berg fell in ruins, crashing like near artillery."²⁵

At other times, the wind died, and the boats would be lowered to tow the brig. This was hard work which resulted in little progress, and the men did not enjoy it. According to Thomas Hickey, at one point while towing the brig in this manner, "Mr. Godfrey, becoming somewhat disgusted with the exercise of rowing, gave an exhibition of his talents as a pugilist. He made an assault upon Mr. Wilson, but was arrested before much blood had been spilt."²⁶ As a result Godfrey once again found himself under the booby hatch to reflect on his sins. Godfrey was quickly proving himself a troublemaker, but perhaps he had some provocation.

John Wilson, originally hired as second in command, was apparently turning out to be a disappointment as an officer to his superiors and inferiors alike. Kane had observed in a letter to his friend, Cornelius Grinnell, just days before, that Wilson "had no control over the men, and was deficient in seamanship as a deck officer."²⁷ Wilson did not win the respect of a man like Godfrey, who was intensely proud of his own abilities and not likely

²⁵Kane, *Arctic Explorations*, vol. I, 34.

²⁶Hickey, *Thomas Hickey's Narrative*, 5.

²⁷EKK to Cornelius Grinnell, [misfiled as EKK to Henry Grinnell], July 20, 1853, EKK Papers.

to suffer humbly the incompetence of a superior. Nor did he win the respect of Kane, who lowered Wilson's position onboard the brig and relied more on the superior seamanship of Brooks, McGary, and Ohlsen. Wilson was not the only officer who was a problem. Kane's friend Goodfellow was totally incompetent when it came to just about anything, and was considered an officer only because he was a "gentleman." To make matters worse, he was proving to be clumsy and a slow learner even though the more experienced first officer, Brooks, patiently tried to teach him.²⁸ While Kane liked to think that the authority of himself and the officers on board was based upon merit, it must have been clear to men like Godfrey that this was not the case.

By the beginning of August, the expedition had made its way through to the "North Water," the region of ice-free water at the north end of Baffin Bay, and on August 6 they sighted the entrance to Smith Sound. No previous expedition had ever sailed very far into Smith Sound, and whalers never went there. The previous summer, Captain Inglefield of the Royal Navy had noted open water as far as he could see in Smith Sound, but he was short on time and only explored a short distance into it, reaching a northern latitude of 78° 28' 21".²⁹ Now Kane pointed his brig north and attempted to travel where no other American or European had ever explored before. To the east the coast of Greenland rose in high cliffs over a thousand feet high. To Kane, these cliffs "looked down on us as if they challenged our right to pass."³⁰

Kane may have been right in this, for he soon discovered that Smith Sound was not as ice-free as it had been the previous summer when Inglefield was there. The expedition had not gone far before they began to encounter ice, which soon clogged the narrow passage they hoped to travel. Determined to continue forward, Kane decided to leave a cache of supplies on nearby Littleton Island as a fall-back position in case of emergency.

²⁸EKK, "Journal," January 29, 1855.

²⁹Pierre Berton, *The Arctic Grail: The Quest for the North West Passage and the North Pole*, (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1988), 236.

³⁰Kane, *Arctic Explorations*, vol. I, 47.

Soon after they left the cache at Littleton Island, the ice turned so thick that sailing became impossible, so Kane ordered that the brig be "warped" down narrow leads of open water along the shallow Greenland coast. This meant that the brig would be pulled forward by means of a capstan and a rope. At low tide the brig often grounded on the shallow bottom near shore, only to be pulled forward as the tide rose again. At other times, when the ice was spaced farther apart, they "tracked," meaning that the men put on harnesses and pulled the brig along the edge of an ice-field with ropes, like mules pulling a barge on a canal. This physically strenuous and discouraging job fell to the crew. Godfrey recollected that days were thus spent with very little progress, and he grew resentful that much of the heavy work fell to him as one of the stronger members of the expedition.³¹ He had signed on for adventure and wonder, but he was quickly finding out that hard labor and constant submission to the will of the officers was the order of the day. In addition to hard physical labor, the crew was also subjected to danger from storms that periodically blew in from the north, setting the ice in motion and threatening to crush the little brig. No doubt this constant danger raised some questions in the men's minds about the wisdom of Doctor Kane and his plans.

As the hardship and danger of the expedition increased, some members of the crew began to have their doubts about the whole endeavor. Petersen, critical of the expedition's goals from the start, repeatedly recommended that the *Advance* be turned southward to find a place to winter at a lower latitude.³² Godfrey and most of the officers except Brooks also came to advocate turning back.³³ But for Kane to turn back at such an early stage would have been an admission of defeat. To find the Open Polar Sea, he felt, every mile further north was important. Even if they did not find the open sea, Kane knew that his reputation would be well served if he attained a new "highest north" record.

³¹Kane, *Arctic Explorations*, vol. I, 60-62; Godfrey, *Godfrey's Narrative*, 61-61.

³²Petersen, *Dr. Kane's Voyage*, 63-65.

³³Godfrey, *Godfrey's Narrative*, 77; EKK, *Arctic Explorations*, vol. I, 83-84.

On August 23, Kane checked the latitude, which he determined to be 78° 41' north. Ever mindful of his honor and reputation, he observed with satisfaction, "We are farther north, therefore, than any of our predecessors, except Parry on his Spitzbergen foot-tramp. There are those with whom, no matter how insuperable the obstacle, failure involves disgrace: we are safe at least from their censure."³⁴

Because of their high latitude and the approaching end of the short Arctic summer, the mean temperature was now dropping below the freezing point. Kane wanted to get still further north, but he was beginning to realize that such a goal was unrealistic.³⁵ As a portion of the crew warped and tracked the *Advance* into a nearby bay, Kane, accompanied by seven others, set out to reconnoiter ahead. After a few days of search, he found that further progress to the north was impossible because of the ice. Scanning the terrain, he realized that he had "seen no place combining so many of the requisites of a good winter harbor as the bay in which we left the *Advance*." Putting a positive spin on their situation, he observed that the streams flowing into the bay from shore would cause the ice to break up early in the spring and that "lofty headlands walled it in beautifully to seaward, enclosing an anchorage with a moderate depth of water; yet it was open to the meridian sunlight, and guarded from winds, eddies, and drift."³⁶ He named the bay Rensselaer Harbor and informed the crew that this was where they would spend the winter.

* * *

The men soon commenced converting the *Advance* from a sailing vessel into winter quarters, which entailed changing the layout of the hold and building an enclosed house on the deck. They also built a storehouse on an island in the bay and emptied the brig's hold into it. Then they built a kennel for the dogs and a stone observatory where Sonntag could take regular astronomical observations. By the middle of September, as they settled into their new home and the water around the brig froze solid, Kane began to send out

³⁴Kane, *Arctic Explorations*, vol. I, 79.

³⁵*Ibid.*, 82.

³⁶*Ibid.*, 102.

expeditions to reconnoiter and deposit caches of supplies in preparation for springtime sledge journeys to the north. All this was part of Kane's well thought-out master-plan of exploration. "My plans of future search were directly dependent upon the success of these operations of the fall. With a chain of provision-depôts along the coast of Greenland, I could readily extend my travel by dogs.... with relays of provisions I could start empty, and fill up at our final station."³⁷

They made some progress laying out cache depots during the short fall season: McGary and Bonsall, accompanied by Godfrey and three others, made a particularly long trip up the coast which lasted twenty-seven days. They made it as far as a mammoth glacier that flowed into the sea from deep in the interior of Greenland. Its face, which dropped massive icebergs into the Arctic waters, was miles wide and blocked any further progress to the north. This glacier, which proved to be the largest on earth, Kane named after Alexander von Humboldt.

Soon, as winter set in, the days shortened and the cold intensified, bringing an end to such journeys.³⁸ By November their long winter's confinement had commenced. Since the small group of men would be confined together for many months, it was important that everyone keep occupied, and, in Kane's words, they developed "schemes innumerable to cheat the monotonous solitude of our winter."³⁹ These entertainments and diversions mirrored those of the world they left behind. They published a small newspaper, which they called the *Ice-Blink*, containing articles written by everyone on board. Kane also organized games, such as the "Fox chase" that Godfrey won, and the men put on plays and gave lyceum-type lectures for each other's amusement and education. They even had a fancy dress ball at Christmas.⁴⁰ Godfrey, who had a penchant for minstrel songs, often

³⁷Ibid., 109.

³⁸Godfrey, *Godfrey's Narrative*, 83-100.

³⁹Kane, *Arctic Explorations*, vol. I, 145.

⁴⁰Thomas Hickey, *Thomas Hickey's Narrative*, 9; Kane, *Arctic Explorations*, vol. I, 145-146.

blackened his face with charcoal and entertained the crew with a form of racist comedy popular during this era.⁴¹

There was also the routine of work to be accomplished. Kane spent much of his time training the dogs to pull a sledge. He hoped that, by springtime, he and the dogs would be skilled enough to make the journey to the Open Polar Sea. There was also the sometimes unpleasant routine of making regular observations of a number of natural phenomena, such as tides, magnetic variation, and temperature, for the advancement of Humboldtian science. This duty fell to the scientific officers, Sonntag, Hayes, Bonsall, and Kane. Kane described the often difficult process of making regular scientific observation in his narrative of the expedition, *Arctic Explorations*:

The observer, if he were only at home, would be the 'observed of all observers.' He is clad in a pair of seal-skin pants, a dog-skin cap, a reindeer jumper, and walrus boots. He sits upon a box that once held a transit instrument. A stove, glowing with at least a bucketful of anthracite, represents pictorially a heating apparatus, and reduces the thermometer as near as may be to ten degrees below zero. One hand holds a chronometer, and is left bare to warm it: the other luxuriates in a fox-skin mitten. The right hand and the left take it 'watch and watch about.' As one burns with cold, the chronometer shifts to the other, and the mitten takes its place.

Perched on a pedestal of frozen gravel is a magnetometer: stretching out from it, a telescope: and, bending down to this, an abject human eye. Every six minutes, said eye takes cognizance of a finely-divided arc, and notes the result in a cold memorandum book. This process continues for twenty-four hours, two sets of eyes taking it by turns: and, when twenty-four hours are over, term-day is over too.⁴²

Kane went on to observe, "'A grateful country' will of course appreciate the value of these labors, and, as it cons over hereafter the four hundred and eighty results which go to make up our record for each week, will never think of asking 'Cui bono all this?'"⁴³

As winter progressed, the intense cold and dark began to take its toll, both physically and mentally. From the end of November until the end of January the darkness was complete, without even the faintest glow of the sun at the horizon. Godfrey described the scene as one of sublime gloom, combining fear with fancy and drawing on popular

⁴¹ Godfrey, *Godfrey's Narrative*, 108.

⁴² Kane, *Arctic Explorations*, vol. I, 165-167.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 167.

No. XVI.

MAGNETIC OBSERVATIONS—Continued.

Tables of hourly readings of the changes of the magnetic declination at Hershel Harbor in 1861.

The following observations for diurnal inequality do not include the hourly observations, which are given elsewhere. The mean time refers to the meridian of our winter quarter, viz.: 16. 12m. W. of Greenwich, or 5h. 22m. W. of Copenhagen. The scale readings commenced thirty minutes before and ended twenty-four minutes after the even hour, the observations being made every sixth minute; the scale readings in the second column of each table are therefore means of ten separate values. The third column contains the deviations from the mean direction, or the hourly change in scale divisions.

The scale reading 200 corresponds to a magnetic declination of 105° 47' west of north; greater readings correspond to a smaller westerly declination, and vice versa. One scale division may be said to equal 0.70°.

Hourly Changes of Magnetic Inclination.

Hour	September 22-23		September 23-24	
	Scale Divisions	Difference	Scale Divisions	Difference
5	242.00	-11.93	242.50	+ 0.51
6	232.33	- 7.31	240.21	- 2.29
7	227.10	- 5.23	231.70	-12.40
8	226.70	+ 0.40	212.50	-24.20
9	224.31	+ 2.39	209.10	- 3.40
10	218.01	- 6.30	205.93	- 3.17
11	213.23	- 4.78	204.24	- 1.69
12	212.10	- 1.13	203.84	- 0.40
13	207.00	- 5.10	202.74	- 1.10
14	207.23	+ 0.23	205.70	- 2.96
15	203.10	- 4.13	204.60	- 1.50
16	205.15	+ 2.05	203.70	- 0.90
17	209.20	+ 4.05	202.00	- 1.70
18	211.60	+ 2.40	202.50	- 0.50
19	212.10	+ 0.50	201.91	- 0.59
20	216.70	+ 4.60	201.91	- 0.00
21	213.70	- 3.00	200.67	- 1.24
22	212.13	- 1.57	200.00	- 0.67
23	213.00	+ 0.87	200.50	- 0.50
0	219.50	+ 6.50	200.50	- 0.00
1	219.13	- 0.37	200.50	- 0.00
2	215.10	- 4.03	201.50	+ 1.00
3	213.10	- 2.00	200.10	- 1.40
4	213.20	+ 0.10	200.90	- 0.80
Mean	213.17	-11.91	201.91	- 1.17



THE MAGNETIC OBSERVATORY.

Figure 8

The process and the result of daily magnetic observations. From *Arctic Explorations*.

theories of the polar regions. "Outside of our vessel nothing was seen but ice, snow, and naked rocks; unless we turned our eyes upward to behold a sky which could not be seen without a thrill of horror, so repulsively unnatural was its appearance. The Arctic heavens, after the disappearance of the sun, resemble a vast arch or dome of granite, almost forcing the beholder to imagine himself in one of 'the profoundest caves of gloomy Dis,' or in one of those central caverns of the earth which, (according to the theory of Captain Simmes,) have their entrance near the Pole."⁴⁴

Not until the end of February did the rays of the sun once again shine on Rensselaer Harbor. In March, perpetual light returned, but the mean temperature for March, was the coldest of any month yet, at -38.09°F .⁴⁵ These conditions, in combination with a diet short on fresh meat and vegetables, resulted in signs of scurvy in the crew. The dogs fared even worse; they began to die off of an unknown malady, so that by the end of the winter only a handful were left.

Despite the prevalence of sickness and the severe temperatures, in March Kane decided that it was time to recommence laying out provision depots. Petersen claimed that Kane determined to send out an expedition so early out of a nationalistic desire to out-do the British expeditions, who usually waited until April before sending out sledging expeditions. Petersen and Ohlsen objected to sending one out so early, but Kane was impatient and insisted.⁴⁶ The expedition was put under the command of Brooks, who was to be accompanied by Petersen, Ohlsen, Sonntag, Wilson, Hickey, Baker and Schubert. On March 19, they began dragging the sledge over the ice. The mean temperature that day was -42.31°F .⁴⁷ As Kane describes it, they left in good spirits, giving three cheers, but, according to the accounts by Godfrey and Petersen, the mood was less spirited.⁴⁸ They

⁴⁴ Godfrey, *Godfrey's Narrative*, 107.

⁴⁵ Kane, *Arctic Explorations*, vol. II, 417.

⁴⁶ Petersen, *Dr. Kane's Voyage*, 77-78; EKK, *Arctic Explorations*, vol. I, 175.

⁴⁷ Kane, *Arctic Explorations*, vol. II, 417.

⁴⁸ Kane, *Arctic Explorations*, vol. I, 180; Petersen, *Dr. Kane's Voyage*, 78-79; Godfrey, *Godfrey's Narrative*, 113-115.

made very slow progress and were in constant danger of getting frostbite on their faces and toes. They soon found that the runners of the sledge were too narrow, causing them to sink into the snow, so Kane sent them a different sledge with wider runners, but still they made slow progress. The first day they traveled only five miles. In the days that followed they took a circuitous route north through the icebergs and hummocks, trying to make their way to the western coast of Smith Sound about forty miles away. They found that they had to travel much farther than the distance they covered because of the constant need to change course to get around hummocks and icebergs. On the second day they walked five miles but only made two and a half miles of progress. The third day they advanced only a mile and a half, although they dragged the sledge for five miles around icy obstacles. This discouragingly slow pace continued until March 29, when they decided to turn back, their journey having been largely a failure. The next morning, however, they awoke to find that four of their party, Brooks, Wilson, Schubert, and Baker, had gotten severe frost-bite on their feet and were unable to walk. Because of this Brooks sent Petersen, Sonntag, and Ohlsen to walk to the brig to get help, while Thomas Hickey stayed to tend to the four injured men.⁴⁹

Petersen, Sonntag, and Ohlsen arrived unexpectedly back at the brig around midnight in a state of total exhaustion. Godfrey recalled, "Their faces were absolutely black. Ohlsen's toes were frozen; Sonntag was stupefied, and appeared to be unconscious of his situation; Petersen was in a similar condition."⁵⁰ Ohlsen, who was the only one still coherent, reported on the condition of the men back in the tent, and, as a result, Kane began to organize a rescue mission.

As soon as morning came, Kane departed with a party of men to rescue their five companions. Ohlsen, whose toes had been amputated the night before by Hayes on

⁴⁹ August Sonntag, "Report of the Advance Party, and attempt to reach the Northern Shore, in charge of Henry Brooks," in Kane, *Arctic Explorations*, Vol. II, Appendix No. V, 348-352.

⁵⁰ Godfrey, *Godfrey's Narrative*, 118.

account of the frostbite, was wrapped in robes and strapped to the sledge to guide the rescue party. After a twenty hour trek, during which Kane often fainted and had to be helped by the others, and Ohlsen, with his toes just recently amputated, often had to walk, they finally arrived at the little tent pitched in the snow, expecting to find their friends dead from exposure. Luckily they were still alive, though in serious danger. Godfrey arrived first on the scene. "The death-scene I had imagined appeared to be realized when we reached the door of the tent. Four bodies, apparently lifeless, each one enclosed in a sleeping bag, were lying closely together in the little enclosure."⁵¹ Godfrey, Kane, and the others examined the men and found that they were still alive. They did what they could for them, heated and fed them broth to warm them, and after a short rest loaded them onto the sledge for the trip back to the brig.

The journey back was even more grueling than the one out. Now the sledge had the weight of five men on it. Soon the men became so tired that they no longer had any concern for their own lives, and they begged Kane to be allowed to go to sleep on the ice, which would have meant freezing to death. Finally the men would go no farther, so they pitched a tent to rest. All could not fit in the one tent, however, so Kane put McGary in charge with orders to proceed in four hours, and continued on with Godfrey to a point nine miles further on where they had left their other tent and some provisions. Kane's and Godfrey's accounts of the journey they made together tell of hardship which descended into delirium. Kane's account recalls a bear, "who walked leisurely before us and tore up as he went a jumper that McGary had improvidently thrown off the day before. He tore it into shreds and rolled it into a ball, but never offered to interfere with our progress."⁵² Godfrey, however, recalled that, "This bear, in fact, was a creation of the Doctor's fancy. He spoke of it at the time when he supposed that he saw it; but, although my eyesight was much better than his, I saw nothing of the kind."⁵³ Godfrey observed that Kane was

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 126.

⁵² Kane, *Arctic Explorations*, vol. I, 195-196.

⁵³ Godfrey, *Godfrey's Narrative*, 134.

delirious and incoherent during most of their journey together, and what is more. "when he swooned away, as he did two or three times, I carried him on my shoulder."⁵⁴ Godfrey's account here is most likely the truth, for even Kane recalled that Godfrey's role on that march "may atone for many faults of a later time," although Kane does not admit that Godfrey carried him much of the way.⁵⁵

Kane and Godfrey finally got to the tent and went to sleep. When they awoke they heated water and made soup and waited for the others to arrive, which they soon did. Then all proceeded together to the brig. By the time they reached it all were exhausted and delirious, but they were cared for by Dr. Hayes, who had remained with the brig. The four men who had been rescued all made it back to the brig alive, but their condition was deplorable. Brooks never fully recovered, and Wilson was significantly weakened. Schubert and Baker, however, fared worse. Baker died on April 8, a few days after their return. Schubert lingered a bit longer, but was dead by the middle of May. Both were, in Godfrey's words, "unhonored victims of the exploring mania."⁵⁶

The disaster of this first spring exploring party, needless to say, did much to dampen the spirit of exploration in the members of the Second Grinnell Expedition. Two were dead and most of the rest had suffered the severe hardship of this type of Arctic travel. Many had now lost pieces of toes to frostbite. Kane, however, had not given up his ambition to reach farther north, and plans for future sledge journeys continued.

Despite Kane's continued ambition, the expedition was in sorry shape, the men were not healthy, and they were running low on fresh provisions. They had plenty of salted meats, but this was the cause of their scurvy. They needed fresh food badly. What made matters worse was the condition of the ice surrounding their brig. It showed no signs of melting, even as the weather was beginning to warm. Of course this was not yet a matter of great concern. It was to be expected that the brig might not be freed from its icy

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 134.

⁵⁵ Kane, *Arctic Explorations*, vol. I, 196.

⁵⁶ Godfrey, *Godfrey's Narrative*, 144.

harbor until July or August, but earlier than this some of the men started to wonder what would happen to them if the brig was not freed that summer.

With this prospect still well in the future, a fortuitous event happened. The crew of the *Advance* found out that they were not alone. A group of Native Greenlanders from a community called Etah, about ninety miles to the south, showed up unexpectedly at the brig. For hundreds of years, people had lived and raised families in the seemingly inhospitable environs of Smith Sound.⁵⁷ The inhabitants of this region had long ago learned how to survive in a far northern climate, but they had little contact with people to the south. Even the people of southern Greenland were cut off from them by a region around Melville Bay where game was scarce and few people traveled.⁵⁸

These people had the skills necessary to help the explorers survive. They knew the habits of the game in the region and could help supply the "Kabloonah" or white men with the fresh meat they so desperately needed. In return, Kane and his companions had many things that the Greenlanders wanted, such as steel knives and wood. Kane, unlike many explorers in the nineteenth century, understood that there was much he could learn from the Inuit. While many of the British expeditions in the Arctic did their best to insulate

⁵⁷ On the prehistory of Smith Sound see, Karen M. McCullough, *The Ruin Islanders; Early Thule Culture Pioneers in the Eastern High Arctic*, (Hull, Quebec: Canadian Museum of Civilization, 1989).

⁵⁸ The native people of Smith Sound in northern Greenland were called "Arctic Highlanders" by John Ross, who was the first European to encounter them. More recently they have been referred to as the "Polar Eskimo," "Thule Eskimo," or "Smith Sound Eskimo" to distinguish their distinct culture from other Inuit people. For anthropological perspectives of the encounter between these far northern Native Greenlanders and the expedition led by Kane see Wendell H. Oswalt, *Eskimos and Explorers*, (Novato, CA: Chandler & Sharp Publishers, 1979), 109-136; Barry Alan Joyce, "'As the Wolf for the Dog': American Overseas Exploration and the Compartmentalization of Mankind," Ph.D. dissertation, University of California at Riverside, 1995, 328-359. For interesting, more recent accounts of the Inuit from Etah see Jean Malaurie, *The Last Kings of Thule: A Year Among the Polar Eskimo of Greenland*, Gwendolen Freeman trans., (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Company, 1956); Dagmar Freuchen eds., *Peter Freuchen's Book of Eskimos*, (New York: The World Publishing Company, 1961).

themselves from the environment and people outside their ships, Kane had hoped to encounter and learn from the people of the Arctic.

This is not to say that he considered them his equals. None of the members of the expedition did. Kane's first description of them observes that they were "wild and uncouth, but evidently human beings."⁵⁹ Godfrey too found himself, "much amused by the jovial and eccentric behavior of these savages."⁶⁰ To all the Americans the "Esquimaux" were somewhat humorous and potentially dangerous, but all recognized that they were indispensable to them for their ability as hunters.

Soon the two groups entered into negotiations, with Petersen acting as interpreter. Despite his marked inferiority in this context, Kane's approach was to impress the people from Etah with his own superiority. He invited the visitors into the brig. Here, with behavior reminiscent of his treatment of Maggie Fox, Kane "tried to make them understand what a powerful Prospero they had for a host, and how beneficent he would prove himself so long as they did his bidding."⁶¹ He then traded some needles, beads, and pieces of metal for all the walrus meat the Greenlanders had.

While Kane describes this encounter as one in which he impressed the savages with his greatness, it is doubtful that the people from Etah considered themselves to be doing Kane's bidding when they traded with him. The men of the expedition were in poor condition, and it would be surprising if their visitors did not realize as much. It was all Kane could do to prevent them from seeing Baker's corpse, which had not yet been buried since his death the day before. Schubert was still lingering near death, and the others were in poor shape as well. Most likely the Americans were something of a novelty to the Greenlanders, who were interested to see what they were all about. They were quite willing to engage in trade with these newcomers, but it is doubtful that they accepted the subordinate position Kane assigned to them. During the remainder of their time in the

⁵⁹ Kane, *Arctic Explorations*, vol. I, 201.

⁶⁰ Godfrey, *Godfrey's Narrative*, 144.

⁶¹ Kane, *Arctic Explorations*, vol. I, 209.

Arctic. Kane and the rest of the members of the expedition got to know the Greenlanders of Etah very well, and it was the peaceful relationship that developed between the two groups that allowed the expedition to survive another year.

* * *

As the warmer weather of the late spring and early summer arrived, Kane once again began to send out sledging parties. Despite the disaster of the first sledging expedition, he had not yet given up hope of finding the Open Polar Sea. Kane attempted one trip with Godfrey and McGary, but did not get far before turning back. His persistent poor health always stopped him from getting very far himself, but he sent others in his place. One of the most successful trips was made by Dr. Hayes and Godfrey, who made it to the west coast of Smith Sound and explored a good distance to the north, reaching a latitude of 79° 45'. Finally, in late June through early July, using the few remaining dogs to haul their supplies, William Morton and Hans Hendrik made a successful trek north along the Greenland coast, past the great glacier that Kane named for Humboldt. When they returned on July third, Morton reported to Kane that he and Hendrik had come to a steep headland at 81° 22'N. From that vantage point looking out over the sea to the north he could see no ice. This was the highest latitude that any member of the expedition reached, and Morton's report of open water seemed to prove Kane's theory of an Open Polar Sea. Or at least it did to Kane. Some other members of the crew were more skeptical: Godfrey did not believe that Morton had seen the Open Polar sea, and Petersen thought he had just seen a patch of summer open water, but to Kane this was the crowning achievement of the expedition. He happily reported in his journal that, "now in spite of the lockjawed Dogs and the dead and the crippled and the stiff limbed scorbutic - I can say that I have led an expedition whose results will be remembered for all time." The Open Polar Sea had at last been found.⁶²

⁶² Godfrey, *Godfrey's Narrative*, 230; Petersen, *Dr. Kane's Voyage*, 84; EKK, "Journal of the brig *Advance*," July 3, 1854, copy in Dow Collection. The original of the first part of Kane's personal journal

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As the end of summer neared and there was no sign of the ice around the brig melting, Kane, had to decide what to do. Since early June, he had been observing the ice and had noticed that the season was late. At that time he was convinced that a second winter in the ice would be impossible because of their low supply of coal and fresh food, and he began to consider abandoning the brig to return home by open boat.⁶³ After Morton and Hans returned from their successful journey, Kane traveled south to inspect the conditions of the ice, and what he saw did not look good. The season was still late, but he knew that when the ice finally broke up it could do so very quickly, so he still hoped for an August, or even September, liberation from their frozen bay.

Kane knew, at this point, that this liberation might never occur, and that it would be difficult for him and his men to survive another winter, but in the past month he had changed his views on abandoning the brig. He decided that it would not be honorable to leave the *Advance* when there was still a chance they could be liberated late in the season, but he also knew that if he were to head south by open boat it had to be done early while there was still time to make the journey south to Upernavik before winter set in. Late August or early September was too late to start an open boat journey south. He mused on this paradox in his journal. "Now to desert the brig, to abandon my trust and the dearly earned discoveries and material of the cruise is clearly impossible as long as a chance remains of saving them. This matter I settle at once in my mind and by my own dictum, I wont leave the *Advance* until September, *and after September - we cannot leave!*"⁶⁴

Instead of making a firm decision to stay if necessary and preparing for that contingency, Kane came up with an alternative plan to travel with five others in a small boat

of the expedition is in the possession of the Historical Society of Pennsylvania. The original of the second part is in the Stanford University Library; William Morton, *Dr. Kane's Arctic Voyage; Explanatory of a Pictorial Illustration of the Second Grinnell Expedition*, (New York: Barton and Sons, 1857), 18-19.

⁶³ EKK, "Journal," June 9, 1854.

⁶⁴ EKK, "Journal," July 10, 1854.

to Beechey Island, where he hoped to meet with a British expedition commanded by Captain Edward Belcher. He hoped he could obtain stores from them or perhaps even a launch in which he could return to deliver the rest of his men.⁶⁵

This plan was ill-conceived at best. Beechey Island is in Lancaster Sound, in the middle of the Canadian archipelago around 600 miles from Smith Sound. There was no way of knowing if Belcher's squadron would actually be there (it was not), and it was almost as likely to be frozen over by the time Kane reached it as was Smith Sound or Baffin Bay. If conditions were clear enough to get to Beechey Island, why not just go to Upernavik, where they were sure of getting the food and shelter they needed? The only advantage of the Beechey Island plan was that, if by some miracle it worked, it would enable Kane to desert his ship in September rather than July, which in his mind would preserve his honor.⁶⁶

This mission, however, failed, as it was bound to do. Kane found the pack ice blocking the route to Baffin Bay, which made a boat journey to either Beechey Island or Upernavik impossible, so after a three-week journey he returned to the brig with the news. This unwelcome, but not unexpected, report brought to the surface many of the hostilities that had been fermenting among the crew. There were definite factions emerging, some of which were not supportive of Kane's authority. Among the crew, Godfrey and Blake had persistently resisted the authority of the officers, but their hostility seemed aimed towards the officer class in general, rather than Kane in particular. The real threat to Kane's authority came from Petersen and Ohlsen, the two experienced Danish officers who had grown to despise Kane and the whole premise of the expedition. Petersen believed that Kane was utterly incompetent. Others among the crew, however, remained faithful supporters of Kane. Brooks owed his position on board the brig to Kane and his advancement in the Navy was dependent upon Kane's good graces. William Morton.

⁶⁵ Kane, *Arctic Explorations*, vol. I, 310-314.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 312.

Kane's personal steward, also a loyal follower, greatly admired Kane, as did Thomas Hickey, the second steward. Others fell somewhere in the middle. Hayes, Sonntag, McGary, and Bonsall all shared Kane's enthusiasm for exploration, but perhaps were not willing to be part of his "family" or show him the deference he wanted. Then there was John Wall Wilson, whose diary at this time, and throughout the voyage, was filled with the most bitter denunciations of his commander.⁶⁷ It was thus with these varying degrees of loyalty to Kane and the expedition that they faced a second winter.

Kane's plan, which he now presented to the others, was for the crew to remain at the brig for the winter and, in the spring, to abandon it and return south to Upernavik by sledge and open boat. Others, however, especially Petersen and Ohlsen, disagreed with Kane's plan. They thought they would have a better chance if they abandoned the brig right away and heading south before winter set in. Kane thought this a foolish idea that would result in the party getting stranded half way by the onset of winter, so he made the decision to stay, yet grumbling persisted and Kane came to fear an open break.

In hopes of putting an end to such dissension, Kane called the crew together and explained the position. He explained his reasons for wanting to remain with the brig through the winter and his conviction that any attempt to travel south that fall would be foolhardy. Most likely he thought that his superior knowledge and reasoning would convince the men of the error of their ways, but, just in case some still wanted to make the attempt, he gave his permission to anyone still wanting to leave under the command of officers. He asked them all to consider the matter carefully and to state the next day at noon whether they chose to stay or go.⁶⁸

In *Arctic Explorations*, Kane claimed that he made this offer because he did not feel his authority as commander went so far as to demand that the men all stay with the expedition against their will, and he pointed out the custom on whaling ships, when they

⁶⁷ John Wall Wilson, "Diary."

⁶⁸ Henry Goodfellow, "Facts Relating to the Separation of the Ship's Company of the Brig ADVANCE In the Fall of 1854," EKK Papers, B:K 132g.

were beset by ice, to allow whoever wished among the crew to leave the ship. But Kane's decision to allow those who wished to leave the expedition was more the result of his own views on authority. He saw himself as a paternal leader. He wanted to be obeyed without question, but he wanted obedience to be voluntary. His command of the *Advance* was plagued from the start by his desire that his authority not be based solely upon his power as commander, but instead upon his own superior capabilities. By giving the crew the opportunity to choose to stay or go, he was allowing them either to accept or to reject his leadership.

Kane expected some, like Petersen and Godfrey, to take up his offer and leave the brig, but he thought that most would choose to stay with him. In a consultation with Sonntag before making the offer, the astronomer had seemed to concur with Kane that it would be unwise to leave the brig so late in the season and had assured Kane that he thought few would take up his offer.⁶⁹ A decision by most of the men to stay would thus be a ringing endorsement of Kane's command; a decision to leave would be a cruel rejection.

At noon the day after Kane's speech the men stated their choices; each man's name was called and each responded with "yes" to leave and "no" to stay. One after one the men answered "yes." Out of the entire crew, only five men responded "no." Kane was surprised, angered, and hurt by how few chose to remain with him. Brooks was an invalid and had no choice but to remain on the brig. Besides him only William Morton and Thomas Hickey, dedicated followers of Kane, and Henry Goodfellow, a friend from Philadelphia, initially chose to remain with him. Hans Hendrik also chose to stay. To this small group McGary added his name that night and Wilson the next day, after initially choosing to go.⁷⁰

⁶⁹ EKK, "Journal," August 23, 1854.

⁷⁰ EKK, "Journal," August 25 & 26, 1854.

Of those who chose to go, many came as no surprise. Some, like Petersen, Blake, and Godfrey had never submitted to Kane's authority, and perhaps he was glad at the prospect of being rid of them, but the choice of some of the others to leave deeply wounded his pride. Hayes and Sonntag were both gentlemen and scientists whom Kane was distressed to see join the withdrawal party, but perhaps most shocking to him was Amos Bonsall, who was both a friend and a relation by marriage. Kane had especially advised Bonsall to stay with the brig and its commander. "I stated his dangers ahead, my own personal interest in his well being, and his certain loss of reputation and respect at home, he listened with tears in his eyes, but kept to his selfish fears."⁷¹

Contrary to the published accounts, the journal that Kane kept while the expedition was underway gives a clear picture of the commander's feeling of betrayal by the men who withdrew from his expedition that Autumn. "God in Heaven!" he declared, "it makes my blood boil to think that men who so leaned on me, trusted to me, and like little children been taught by me their very walk, should at last in the midst of a coming winter, set up their puerile opinions, against my own dearly earned judgment of Arctic Ice."⁷² To Kane, it was the greatest of insults to have his judgment and leadership rejected. He spit venom onto the pages of his journal. He was especially bitter about the officers who chose to go. "The conduct of Mr. Sonntag is perhaps of all this party the most difficult to palliate," he wrote, "...His conduct has been such as to prohibit between us any future associations of respect. I regret this for his own sake as I could have aided him much at home."⁷³

He now decided that the character of the men who chose to go was fatally flawed while all the virtue lay with those who stayed. "Bonsall, Hayes, and Sonntag had never the associative gallantry and right mindedness of Goodfellow or the whaler McGeary, or the man of war's man Brooks. Petersen was always a cold blooded sneak - Ohlsen double faced fawning and insincere their associates number all the crew except Morton and the

⁷¹ EKK, "Journal," December 9, 1854.

⁷² EKK, "Journal," December 9, 1854.

⁷³ EKK, "Journal," August 26, 1854.

Irish cabin boy Hickey. These two stand out as natural gentlemen when compared with any of the officers or men who are leaving their post."⁷⁴

Despite the permission he granted to leave, he considered all these men deserters. While outwardly he assisted them in their preparation for their long journey south, inwardly he fumed, such as when he addressed himself in his journal to his younger brother, John. "If I ever live to get home - Home! and should meet Dr. Hayes or Mr. Bonsall or Mr. Sonntag - let them look out for their skins. If I dont live to thrash them - which I'll try very hard to do, (to live I mean) why then dear brother John seek a solitary orchard and maul them for me. Dont honour them with a bullet and let the mauling be solitary - save to the principals - It would hurt your character to be wrestling with such low minded sneaks."⁷⁵

Kane insisted that those who chose to leave the brig were forever severing themselves from the expedition and absolving him from all responsibility for their actions. He insisted that all the officers sign a paper to this effect before they left. Christian Ohlsen, however, refused to sign the paper. Petersen's view was that Kane, by making them sign such a document, was pressuring Ohlsen and the other officers to stay, "partly by persuasion and not without some menace, as it seems to me."⁷⁶ Clearly Kane wanted as many skilled men like Ohlsen to stay as possible, and he told Ohlsen if he did not sign the paper his withdrawal would be considered desertion. Eventually Ohlsen, despite having been elected commander of the withdraw party, decided to stay rather than sign.⁷⁷

* * *

The two factions now divided the ship's supplies and, on August 26 the withdrawal party, commanded now by Petersen, began to drag their boat and provisions south by sledge, and within a few days they were out of communication with the brig. One of the

⁷⁴ EKK, "Journal," August 28, 1854.

⁷⁵ EKK, "Journal," September 5, 1854.

⁷⁶ Petersen, *Dr. Kane's Voyage*, 86.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 86-87.

withdrawal party, Riley, soon changed his mind and returned to the brig, but the rest continued on.⁷⁸ Those who stayed settled down to another long winter. Kane was wise enough to realize that their best chance of survival was to cultivate good relations with the Native Greenlanders at Etah and to partially emulate their way of life. He had an interesting mix of admiration and contempt for the people of Etah. He resolved "to practice on the lessons we had learned from the Esquimaux. I had studied them carefully, and determined that their form of habitations and their peculiarities of diet, without their unthrift and filth, were the safest and best to which the necessity of our circumstances invited us."⁷⁹

The first priority was to secure fresh meat. The ships stores were plentiful, but caused the crew to become ill and weak with scurvy. Only emulating the native diet could prevent them all from dying of scurvy, so Kane did his best to hunt seals and other game, but in this he was not very successful. He was more successful in getting fresh meat from the skilled hunters at Etah.

The relationship with the Greenlanders was not easy to maintain. Shortly after the withdrawal party departed, those who remained with the brig were visited by three individuals from Etah. After offering them every hospitality, Kane was distressed to discover in the morning that their three guests had "repaid my liberality by stealing not only the lamp, boiler, and cooking-pot they had used for the feast, but Nannook also, my best dog." They also took some buffalo robes and some India-rubber cloth.⁸⁰ Kane felt that to put up with such theft would be an admission of weakness, so he sent out Morton and Riley to apprehend the miscreants. This they did. After a difficult forced march of thirty miles each way they brought the suspected culprits back to the brig with the stolen goods. Kane was evidently satisfied with the impression this made of strength. "It was hardly twenty-four hours since they left the brig with their booty before they were prisoners in the hold, with a dreadful white man for keeper, who never addressed to them a word that had

⁷⁸ EKK, "Journal," September 2, 1854

⁷⁹ Kane, *Arctic Explorations*, vol. I, 353.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 365.

not all the terrors of an unintelligible reproof, and whose scowl, I flatter myself, exhibited a well-arranged variety of menacing and demoniacal expressions.”⁸¹

To Kane this display of strength “confirmed them in the faith that the whites are and of right ought to be everywhere the dominant tribe.”⁸² This was Kane’s impression, but perhaps the Native Greenlanders were simply convinced that Kane and his men were insane. The Canadian observer of Inuit life, Farley Mowat, has observed that, “Kane and his men certainly gave the Eskimos sufficient reason to suspect that they were a band of dangerous lunatics.”⁸³ In any case, the result of this conflict was a treaty between the two groups. According to Kane, the Greenlanders promised not to steal, to provide the expedition with fresh meat and dogs, and to accompany them in the hunt. In turn Kane’s men promised not to harass the Inuit with sorcery, to help them in the hunt with their guns, to welcome them at the brig, and to give them “presents of needles, pins, two kinds of knife, a hoop, three bits of hard wood, some fat, an awl, and some sewing thread.”⁸⁴ However it was understood by the Greenlanders, this treaty established good relations between the two groups which lasted for the remainder of the expedition. For much of the remaining autumn the two groups hunted together, and the Americans learned a great deal about living in the Arctic.

* * *

As the darkness of December set in, the men on the brig were surprised one morning by the approach of five sledges. Kane recalled, “the strangers proved to be a party who had escorted to our lonely harbour, two of our absentees. These wretched men were Bonsall and Petersen, who had reaped the bitter fruit of want of faith and were now the bearers of a frightful tale.”⁸⁵ A few days later the remaining members of the withdrawal

⁸¹ Ibid., 367.

⁸² Ibid., 368.

⁸³ Farley Mowat, *The Polar Passion, The Quest for the North Pole*, (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1967), 113.

⁸⁴ Kane, *Arctic Explorations*, vol. I, 369.

⁸⁵ EKK, “Journal of the Brig Advance,” December 7, 1854.

party arrived. It was not without some degree of satisfaction that Kane reported their return to the brig. The group had traveled close to three-hundred miles to the south before being stopped by the onset of winter, just as Kane predicted. They had built a small hut for themselves and tried to survive by hunting, but it was not long before they began to starve. They had tried to obtain food from the local Greenlanders but were not very successful. Eventually they were forced to admit defeat and return to the brig.⁸⁶

The return of these men was, for Kane, a vindication, and he made a great show of welcoming these prodigal crew members back into the fold, but he was not about to let them forget their sinful ways. He shared provisions equally with the returning deserters, but had them mess separately and did not recognize them as officially rejoining the expedition. This would have been "an injury to the brave men who had abided to their trust."⁸⁷ The "truant and the faithful" would thus form two separate groups on board, with the further distinction of Blake and Godfrey who "being outlawed by their late associates have to eat by themselves."⁸⁸ Apparently these two had been even less willing to submit to the authority of the withdrawal party officers than they had been to submit to Kane's.

In such a state of division the Second Grinnell Expedition spent its second winter. They were constantly hungry, cold, and sick. Most had scurvy, and Kane's sick list usually included a majority of the crew. Uncharacteristically, Kane was among the healthiest of them all, since he supplemented his diet by eating rats, while the others refrained from this delicacy. Needless to say, they were not the happy family bound together by camaraderie and national pride in discovery that Kane envisioned at the start of the voyage. They barely tolerated one another. Back in November, Goodfellow had ceased being on speaking terms with any other officer, and throughout the winter Wilson

⁸⁶ The experience of the withdrawal party is recounted in Isaac Hayes, *An Arctic Boat Journey in the Autumn of 1854*, (Boston: Ticknor and Fields, 1860).

⁸⁷ EKK, "Journal," December 13, 1854.

⁸⁸ EKK, "Journal," December 13, 25, 1854.

lay in his bunk, with swollen legs, venting his anger at Kane and the others into his own private journal.⁸⁹

According to Petersen, "Dr. Kane was often out of humour and unkind in his treatment."⁹⁰ He had lost many of his qualms against naval discipline and resorted to striking Godfrey and Blake with a belaying pin to keep them in line.⁹¹ He also threatened to shoot Hans Hendrik if he did not obey orders, according to Petersen.⁹² Kane's most drastic resort to corporal punishment, however, came in his dealings with William Godfrey. In the middle of March, while Hendrik was on a journey to Etah, ninety miles to the south, Kane's increasingly paranoid mind became convinced that Blake and Godfrey were planning to escape from the brig, waylay Hendrik, steal the few remaining dogs, and go off to live with the Greenlanders. It is unclear what evidence he had for this suspicion, but he began to keep a close eye on them. On the nineteenth, Kane claims to have discovered the two of them trying to leave the brig. He confronted them and confined them to the brig, yet despite this, Godfrey was soon gone. "His intention," wrote Kane, "undoubtedly is to reach Etah Bay, and, robbing Hans of sledge and dogs, proceed south to Netlik."⁹³

Godfrey's account of what happened is quite different. He claimed that he had become aware that Hans Hendrik was romantically involved with a woman named Choolakee at Etah. "Hans entrusted to me the secret of his love, and declared his intention to elope from the brig at the first opportunity."⁹⁴ Godfrey was not willing to inform on Hendrik, yet he became concerned when Hendrik left for Etah with the dogs and sledge for much-needed provisions. Godfrey began to fear that Hendrik was not planning to come

⁸⁹ EKK, "Journal," November 20, 1854; John Wall Wilson, "Diary."

⁹⁰ Petersen, *Dr. Kane's Voyage*, 148.

⁹¹ EKK, "Journal," January 10, 1855; Wilson, "Diary," December 13, 1854.

⁹² Petersen, *Dr. Kane's Voyage*, 150, 153.

⁹³ Kane, *Arctic Explorations*, Vol. II, 75.

⁹⁴ Godfrey, *Godfrey's Narrative*, 145.

back, so he left the brig for Etah to convince him to return and to try to get some provisions.⁹⁵

Godfrey's version of events is supported in part by his subsequent actions. After a difficult ninety-mile trek on foot, he found Hendrik at Etah claiming to be sick. Instead of stealing his dogs and running off to Netlik, as Kane thought he would do, Godfrey secured a sledge-load of meat from the people of Etah and returned to the brig with the dogs. Kane's and Godfrey's accounts of what happened when Godfrey arrived back at the Brig do not significantly vary, except in the motive attributed to Godfrey's actions. Godfrey stopped about fifty yards from the *Advance*, where he was greeted by Bonsall. Godfrey claimed he was not prepared to go on board until he "was assured of meeting with friendly treatment."⁹⁶ Kane and Bonsall went out to meet Godfrey on the ice. Godfrey offered up the meat and said he would then return to Etah. Kane claimed Godfrey was returning to live at Etah, while Godfrey claimed he was only going back for more provisions. Kane, who held his pistol, demanded that the sailor return to the brig, but he refused. At this point Kane handed his pistol to Bonsall and went back to the brig for irons in which to confine the supposed deserter. Godfrey, however, was not willing to be confined in irons, so, leaving the sledge, meat and dogs with Bonsall, he began to leave on foot despite Bonsall's threats to shoot. As Godfrey ran off Bonsall fired, but the pistol "failed at the cap," at which point Kane, then on the deck of the brig, "jumped at once to the gun-stand; but my first rifle, affected by the cold, went off in the act of cocking, and a second, aimed in haste a long but practicable distance, missed the fugitive. He made good his escape before we could lay hold of another weapon."⁹⁷

To Kane, his unsuccessful attempt to shoot Godfrey was a justifiable attempt by a commander to discipline a mutinous and dangerous crew member, while to Godfrey it was attempted murder. Godfrey was acting entirely outside of Kane's authority, but there is no

⁹⁵ Ibid., 179-184.

⁹⁶ Ibid., 185.

⁹⁷ Kane, *Arctic Explorations*, vol. II, 89.

credible evidence that he planned to harm Hendrik and steal the dogs as Kane believed. Godfrey was refusing any longer to recognize Kane's authority, but by bringing the crew much needed meat from Etah he showed that he still had the best interests of his shipmates in mind. Godfrey felt that after the attempted withdrawal, when Kane gave permission to leave the expedition, he was no longer subject to Kane's orders.⁹⁸

Godfrey went back to Etah on foot, but eventually both he and Hendrik returned to the brig. Kane claimed he took Godfrey back as a prisoner, but Godfrey says that he returned when Kane came to Etah and asked him as a friend to return. However much the two feared, disliked, and misunderstood each other, they must have realized, as spring approached, that if either wished to return home they needed the other.⁹⁹ Hans Hendrik, on the other hand, did not need Dr. Kane as much as Kane needed him, and he took the opportunity the following month to leave the expedition for good, which further supports Godfrey's account. Kane reported his disappearance in *Arctic Explorations*. "Hans the faithful - yet, I fear, the faithless - was last seen upon a native sledge, driving south from Peteravik, with a maiden at his side, and professedly bound to a new principality at Uwarrow Suk-suk, high up Murchison's Sound. Alas for Hans, the married man."¹⁰⁰

* * *

All hopes were now directed towards the spring, when they planned to make their escape. Kane realized that they could not wait for the brig to be released from the ice as they had the previous summer. Instead he planned to leave the *Advance* in May, and haul the boats on sledges until they reached open water to the south. They would then sail to Upernavik. As spring approached, Kane organized the men in making preparations. At this Kane was at his best. His abilities as an organizer helped insure the men's survival.

⁹⁸ Godfrey, *Godfrey's Narrative*, 182.

⁹⁹ Kane, *Arctic Explorations*, vol. II, 111; Godfrey, *Godfrey's Narrative*, 199.

¹⁰⁰ Kane, *Arctic Explorations*, vol. II, 235. Despite his desertion, Hans Hendrik went on to have an illustrious career as a polar explorer, working with Charles Hall and George Nares on later American expeditions.

He set a date for departure, May 17, and all were set to work preparing for that day. Some sewed warm garments, while others packaged bundles of provisions or prepared the whale boats on the sledges. When, at last, the day of departure came, they began hauling the two boats with all their gear over the ice. Four of the men were not well enough to help in this work, and these men Kane shuttled on a sledge with the dog team to a hut several miles to the south.

While the men dragged the boats, Kane tended to the sick and did what he could to obtain large quantities of fresh meat from Etah. As usual, the assistance of the Inuit was instrumental to their well being. With this important help, the journey southward went better than any of them expected, and their spirits began to improve, as did their health, as they were now eating large quantities of vitamin-rich raw meat. The journey was not without its dangers though, and sadly one day, as they neared the open water, one of the runners of the sledge carrying the boat, *Hope*, broke through the ice. Ohlsen held up the sledge while the rest pulled it up onto safer ice, but in the process ruptured himself internally, and a few days later he died of these injuries.¹⁰¹

On June 16, four days after burying Ohlsen, Kane reported, "Our boats are at the open water. We see its deep indigo horizon, and hear its roar against the icy beach. Its scent is in our nostrils and our hearts."¹⁰² Two days later they bade good-bye to their friends from Etah and set out upon the water. In the weeks that followed the two small boats made their way southward along the coast of Greenland. They had to contend with ice, severe weather, and cold temperatures and often had to stop to wait out bad weather or restock their fresh food supply, but, on August third, they arrived at Upernavik. From Upernavik they took passage to Godhaven where they heard that an expedition had been sent out to find them. A few days later they met with this expedition, and in October 1855 they were welcomed back at New York.

¹⁰¹ Kane, *Arctic Explorations*, vol. II, 240-241.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, 244-245.

* * *

When the men of the Second Grinnell Expedition left New York harbor in the springtime of 1853, they shared a feeling of pride in being a part of an American scientific and humanitarian mission to explore new worlds and rescue a lost sailor. They shared a popular American curiosity about the unknown, and they represented to the world the way diverse elements of American society could come together in pursuit of geographic discovery. As they sailed off into the Arctic they represented a unified American nationalism projecting itself into the world.

Unfortunately, the experiences of the Second Grinnell Expedition did not live up to these expectations. They did not remain a unified party of men driven by enthusiasm. As they left behind the cultural milieu that created their mission, social relations broke down and their differences came to overcome their veneer of unity. As Carl Petersen observed, the "heterogeneous elements" on board the *Advance* did not live in concord with each other.¹⁰³ Now, as they returned to the world they had left over two years before, they faced the job of representing their experiences to the nation. In this Dr. Kane met with his greatest success.

¹⁰³ Petersen, *Dr. Kane's Voyage*, 148.

CHAPTER EIGHT

THE HOMEFRONT, HOMECOMINGS, AND IMPERTINENT CURIOSITY

When the Second Grinnell Expedition set off for the Arctic regions, Margaret Fox was safely deposited at Crookville, Pennsylvania. There Elisha Kane expected her to study her lessons and cultivate her sensibility to the point where she could pass as a suitable mate for a gentleman like himself. The plan must have sounded fine coming from Kane. Fox would forgo the deception of spiritualism. She would become genteel. Separated from the evil influences of her sister, Leah Brown, she would develop self-respect and learn the role of an upper-middle class wife who could be honored by society. Yet once Kane was out of the picture, Margaret Fox had time to take stock of her situation. For five years she had led an interesting and stimulating, if not altogether honest, life. She had seen much of the country. She had met the nation's most famous men and women. She had had fun, and she had made friends. Now all that was gone. She had promised Kane never again to take part in the rappings. While Mr. and Mrs. Turner, with whom she stayed, were nice country people, they could hardly provide the interest that her former life had given her.

Margaret Fox's confinement in Crookville was made even more difficult by the ambiguous nature of her position. She had submitted to Elisha Kane's control, but he was thousands of miles away, confronting the Arctic ice. By default she fell under the informal control of her keepers, Susannah Turner and Cornelius Grinnell. Turner acted as Fox's governess. For ten dollars a week, she provided a place for Fox in her and her husband's rural home and took charge of her education. Fox took French lessons, practiced the piano, and did everything she could to cultivate the skills necessary for her to take her place one day in upper middle-class society as Dr. Kane's wife.

Cornelius Grinnell meanwhile held the purse-strings. Kane had left money with Grinnell, making him into a sort of trustee for Maggie Fox. Every time Turner needed to be paid, or Fox needed money for anything at all, Fox had to write Grinnell to get a portion of what Kane had left for her benefit and support. This sort of dependence was a new situation for her. As a spirit-rapper for the past five years, Maggie Fox had earned a good living by her own labor. It is not clear who controlled the money she had earned - most likely her mother - but it is clear that, while she remained an active rapper, Maggie Fox had been left with a good deal to spend on her own. She had occupied the unusual position of being financially independent as a teenager, and her spending habits had formed accordingly. Now that was no longer the case. To become genteel, she had to be cast back into a more traditional role of a dependent.

By the autumn 1853, Maggie Fox was tiring of Crookville. She wanted to go to New York City to visit with some of her non-spiritualist friends. She had developed a particular friendship with Ellen Walter, who lived at Clinton Place in New York City. We know little of Ellen Walter besides the description Elizabeth Ellet wrote of her in *The Love-Life of Dr. Kane*. Ellet describes Walter as the sister of John Cochrane, a prominent New York lawyer, who would later be active in New York and national politics.¹ Walter was part of respectable middle-class New York society, which shows that Maggie Fox, despite her new position of dependence, was not just a poor, unconnected girl who depended solely on Kane as a benefactor.

Walter invited Fox to take a break from her studies to stay with her in New York for a time, but first, twenty-year-old Fox felt it necessary to ask permission of her keepers. While Cornelius Grinnell and Susannah Turner had no legal authority over her, Fox soon learned that she had to conform to their wishes and submit to their control. Her letter to Cornelius Grinnell, in which she asks permission to go, is full of deference and clearly

¹*The Love-Life of Dr. Kane*, (New York: George Carleton, 1865) 163; "John Cochrane," *Dictionary of American Biography*.

indicates her standing at the time. "My dear Sir, I am very lonely and should love very much to go and spend a few days with my friend Mrs. Walter," wrote Fox. "Will you please do me the kindness to write to Mrs. Turner and tell her to let me spend say one week with Mrs. Walter." She continued, sounding disturbingly like a child begging her parents. "Mrs. Turner knows very well who Mrs. Walter is and would be very happy to let me go, but says she is afraid it might not please all my friends if I should leave my studies. Will you please have the kindness to say to her that Mrs. Walter will see that I return in one week." In a post-script, Fox apologized for bothering Grinnell and continued in a pleading tone. "Mrs. Turner dislikes very much to have me leave my French for a week, but I will take my French books and study an hour every day."²

The tone of deference in this and other letters like it is remarkable. Neither Turner nor Grinnell should have been in a position to tell her what to do. Even Kane, before he departed on his expedition, had told Fox that she would be in control of her own life. At Turner's, he told her, "you will be a lady; your own mistress, and a person regarded with respect by the whole house. It shall be distinctly understood that you go or stay just as you please; -for I am not going to turn 'preacher' and bind up my little Maggie by a set of rules."³ In practice, however, age, class, and gender served to place Fox in a subordinate position. But most of all, Fox's dependence was about the money.

Because of her promise to Kane to forgo the rappings, Fox could no longer earn money herself. Instead, she had to beg it from Grinnell. This constantly re-enforced her subordination. In her letters to Grinnell, she tried vainly to come up with an appropriate way to ask for money of a man who was essentially a stranger. "Will you also please send me 80 dollars by return of mail? Pardon me for giving you so much trouble." she asked in one letter.⁴ The following week she wrote, "I sent you a letter some five or six days since

²Margaret Fox to Cornelius Grinnell, n.d. [early Autumn 1853], EKK Papers.

³*Love-Life*, 101.

⁴Margaret Fox to Cornelius Grinnell, Wednesday Evening, August 9, [1854], EKK Papers.

in which I requested you to send me eighty dollars, but if you have not yet attended to my request I should prefer one hundred. Will you please send this at your earliest convenience."⁵ Another note read, "Will you please send me one hundred and ninety dollars. I would like to have you send it in bills if it will not incommode you."⁶

Fox was aware that she was becoming increasingly beholden to Grinnell. In an undated letter, she acknowledged the receipt of one-hundred-twenty dollars, part of which would be spent, according to Fox, "to liquidate some necessary expenses which I have incurred." She then asked for sixteen dollars more by return mail. She added a postscript, "I hope I shall not have to send for any more money."⁷ The line "Pardon me for giving you so much trouble," or close variations of it appear repeatedly in Fox's letters to Grinnell.⁸ She clearly felt awkward to be dependent on a virtual stranger, but she was motivated by her desire to please Kane and to find a way out of spirit rapping. She wanted to earn the good opinion of polite society, despite her colorful past.

Her willingness to take a subordinate role and her uneasiness at having to ask constantly for money did not keep her entirely back. She maintained social connections with her own friends in New York. She went to stay with Ellen Walter, and she stayed more than a week. Apparently her stay was extended because she became ill, and her doctor, Edward Bayard, feared having her travel back to Crookville.⁹ Her mother and two sisters were also living in New York City by this time. While Fox stayed away from Leah Brown, she maintained a close relationship with her mother and with Kate, even though Kate was still a practicing spirit-rapper.

⁵Margaret Fox to Cornelius Grinnell, August 15, 1854, EKK Papers.

⁶Margaret Fox to Cornelius Grinnell, n.d., EKK Papers.

⁷Margaret Fox to Cornelius Grinnell, n.d., EKK Papers.

⁸Margaret Fox to Cornelius Grinnell, n.d., "Wednesday Evening," August 9, [1854], "Thursday Evening," August 24, [1854], September 1, 1855, EKK Papers.

⁹Susannah Turner to Cornelius Grinnell, December 29, 1853, EKK Papers;

Fox also spent money in startling quantities. In many of her appeals to Grinnell she asked for between one and two hundred dollars - significant sums for the 1850s.¹⁰ Perhaps because her spirit-rapping career had been so lucrative, she had developed little notion of the value of money. She and her sisters probably could earn over fifty dollars in a single day as spirit-rappers. That was almost as much as Kane earned in an entire month as a Navy surgeon. While Kane would get twenty-five dollars for a single lecture, the Fox sisters could do three "promiscuous circles" a day with each participant paying one dollar.¹¹ Undoubtedly, this money added up, but there is little indication that anybody but Leah Fish Brown saved any of it. Ironically, while Fox's association with Kane had the potential to elevate her social status, it also reduced her spending power.

Turner and Grinnell soon came to consider Fox irresponsible with money, but she was not as much of a spendthrift as she at first appears. Much of the money she asked of Grinnell was to pay Susannah Turner ten dollars a week for her room and board or to pay for such things as French lessons. These are expenses for which Kane had agreed to pay, in order to fulfill his own paternalistic goals, when he was trying to convince Maggie Fox to give up spiritualism and be placed in school. Once he was gone, however, Fox was in the position of having to beg the necessary money out of Grinnell, acting as trustee. Fox was trying to live up to Kane's expectations, but he had not left her the resources to do so. In many ways it was Kane who was the spendthrift. He was playing the great man in order to woo Fox away from spiritualism. In doing so he committed himself to expenses he could not really afford, just as he was making promises he would find difficult to fulfill.

¹⁰A large correspondence between Cornelius Grinnell and Margaret Fox survives among Kane's papers at the APS library, most of which consist of Fox asking Grinnell to send money. Apparently Grinnell kept all these letters as receipts to present to Kane upon his return from the Arctic.

¹¹For instance Kane's salary during the first Grinnell Expedition was seventy-five dollars a month. Edwin J. DeHaven, "Papers Relating to the Grinnell Arctic Expedition of 1850," New York Historical Society.

As Grinnell doled out hundreds of dollars to Maggie Fox, he wondered if he was sending her too much. In a short time, all the money Kane had left with him was gone. In February 1854, when Kane had been gone a little over eight months, Grinnell wrote to Elisha Kane's younger brother, Robert Patterson Kane, who was a lawyer. Grinnell told him that Fox had already spent all the money left with him and asked advice. "I am desirous of doing everything in my power to carry out your brother's wishes, and at the same time to promote his happiness, and unless you should deem it in all respects advisable to inform her that her funds are exhausted, I will forward the amount she requests without delay."¹²

Robert Kane wrote back to Grinnell telling him to send the money, but that it should come out of his own pocket rather than Grinnell's. Robert Kane also took the opportunity to spell out exactly how he wanted his brother's relationship with Fox presented. They should take advantage of Fox's need of money to let her know where she stood.

It does strike me that the opportunity presented of letting the young lady know your own impression of her position which she bears to the doctor, should not be lost. We know her only as a dependent, as one to whom the doctor bears the relation of a kind hearted friend whose interest in the young lady shows itself by furnishing her with the means of leading an honest life and resisting the temptations which beset a poor girl with a pretty face and an already disreputable association. My dear brother resembles our very lovable Don Quixote; but then this resemblance must not be construed into anything affecting his reputation. Etc. Etc.

The funds in your hands are exhausted. The trustee reports accordingly. The Doctor is your friend; but [Fox] is not his mistress and holds to him no other relation than that of the recipient of his charity and to you no other than that of a purely business correspondent.

Do you take my drift! I am in such haste that I fear I am not writing intelligibly.¹³

Robert Kane went on to say that the two of them had a higher goal than simply saving money, but of saving "that which we both of us value much more." Presumably he was referring to Elisha's reputation. He ended with a plea for Grinnell to "Burn this."

¹²Cornelius Grinnell to Robert Patterson Kane, February 4, 1854, EKK Papers.

¹³Robert Patterson Kane to Cornelius Grinnell, February 13, 1854.

By asking "Do you take my drift." at the end of his description of Fox's position in relation to his brother, Robert Kane is clearly giving a wink and a nod to Grinnell. He certainly did not think Fox and his brother would ever marry, but he also realized that the official story he was so painfully spelling out was not the truth. Robert Kane must have thought that Elisha was simply engaged in a brief and impetuous fascination, or perhaps even a sexual affair, with Maggie Fox. His job, as he saw it, was to humor his reckless brother until his infatuation with the spirit-rapper passed. Moreover, he thought that Maggie Fox could only benefit from the interest of a man like Kane, even if she was just a passing fancy or mistress. Elisha Kane may have even encouraged his brother to think along these lines. The story Elisha told him was definitely not the same one he told Maggie Fox, but it is unclear exactly what he did tell his brother.

Cornelius Grinnell, like Robert Patterson Kane, seemed to think that Fox was simply a temporary infatuation, whom Kane would soon get over. Grinnell knew that the story of a "committee of benevolent gentlemen" acting in Fox's best interest had been largely fabricated by Kane. He knew that the two were engaged in a secret correspondence, since he had, at various times acted as messenger between them. While his earlier exchange with Robert Patterson Kane left some ambiguity as to what he thought, there are clear indications he did not think of Fox as Kane's fiancée.¹⁴ In a letter to Kane sent with the relief expedition in June 1855, Grinnell would refer to rumors circulating about an engagement. He called these rumors ridiculous and blamed Leah Fish Brown for them. "She [Brown] has endeavored to spread about a report that you are educating Miss F with the intention of marrying her on your return. I have done everything in my power to contradict such insinuations, and as I have heard nothing of them of late I trust they have 'died out.'"¹⁵ Since he did not believe the two of them planned to marry, and he knew the

¹⁴In a letter to Elisha's brother Robert Patterson Kane a few years later, Grinnell said that the idea that Kane and Fox were ever married was absurd. Cornelius Grinnell to Robert Patterson Kane, October 5, 1858, Robert Patterson Kane Papers, APS library.

¹⁵Cornelius Grinnell to EKK, June 2, 1855, EKK Papers.

“benevolent gentleman” story was a fabrication, it is not unlikely that Grinnell thought that Fox was Kane’s mistress.

Regardless of what he thought, by April 1854 Grinnell was still concerned about how much money Maggie Fox was spending. He asked Fox to account for all the money he had sent her. This letter no longer exists, but Fox’s reply does. “I cannot for the love of my life tell how much money I have had from you since Dr. Kane left. I thought of course you kept an account.” She then recalled her expenses: nine months at Turner’s at forty dollars a month, thirteen dollars for French books and drawing materials, twenty dollars on clothes, ten dollars for the doctor, fifty dollars for travel expenses. She concluded, “I fear yourself and Dr. Kane will both think I have been very thoughtless.”¹⁶ Eventually Grinnell began to deal directly with Susannah Turner for much of Fox’s financial affairs, which further removed her from control of her situation.¹⁷

Fox’s life-style remained essentially the same for over two years while Kane was away on his expedition. No longer a spirit-rapper, she was largely out of the public eye. She spent most of her time in the domestic surroundings of Turner’s Crookville home. As the months went by, she frequently made extended visits to New York to stay with Ellen Walter and live in a more social and sophisticated atmosphere. She was no longer a spirit-rapper, but since she was not formally recognized as Kane’s fiancée, she occupied an ambiguous position. In *The Love-Life of Dr. Kane*, Ellet asserts that Cornelius Grinnell, Susannah Turner, and Ellen Walter all considered Fox Kane’s bride-to-be. As we have already seen, this was not entirely the case, but Ellet may have been correct in regard to Mrs. Walter and her circle (most likely Ellet and Walter knew one another). Ellen Walter and her friends were respectable middle-class people who knew Maggie Fox and liked her. They would have seen nothing wrong with a match between her and Kane. Turner as well may have assumed that Kane was paying for Fox’s education because he planned to marry

¹⁶Margaret Fox to Cornelius Grinnell, April 21, 1854, EKK Papers.

¹⁷Susannah Turner to Cornelius Grinnell, July 2, 1855, July 24, 1855, September 27, 1855, October 15, 1855, EKK Papers

her. But, as there had been no formal announcement of an engagement, few would have thought it their business to pry. If Turner or Walter thought it was Kane's intention to marry Fox, it was probably an unspoken assumption. The only other key player was Eliza Leiper, Kane's aunt, who had first recommended Susannah Turner to her nephew. Leiper lived nearby, and she met Fox a few times while she was at Crookville, but it is not clear what she thought of the status of Fox. Unlike Robert Kane and Cornelius Grinnell, Leiper must have trusted that her nephew's intentions, whatever they were, were honorable.

* * *

Meanwhile Maggie Fox trusted in Kane's sincerity and was impatient for his return. She was not the only one worried about him. Kane's friends and family, and the friends and families of all the expedition members, looked for the return of the expedition each October as the Arctic sailing season ended. In October 1853, there was some thought that the expedition might return, but all knew that such an early end to the voyage was unlikely. Most expected that this expedition, like the First Grinnell Expedition, would spend one winter in the Arctic and return around October 1854. Fox even wrote an exuberant letter to Kane from Crookville, which she sent to Grinnell in New York to give to Kane in case he returned in the Autumn of 1854.¹⁸ "Oh! My dear Ly I am so happy with the idea of writing you once more," she wrote. She told him to visit Ellen Walter upon his return, then have Walter accompany him when he came for her in Crookville. Fox had it all planned. She assumed that Kane would take her to meet his family, but she was nervous at the prospect. "I would much rather go from here to Mrs. Walter's than to Judge Kane's. You know I am not at all acquainted with your father and mother. When you come after me Mrs. Walter, yourself and I will call on Mrs. Leiper, and then dear Ly I would rather go to Mrs.

¹⁸Maggie Fox to EKK, n.d., EKK Papers; While this letter is not dated the content indicates that it was written in late summer or early fall 1854. Moreover in letters to Cornelius Grinnell dated August 1854 Fox refers to a note she had sent him to give to Kane when he returned. Most likely, this is that note. Maggie Fox to Cornelius Grinnell, August 20, 1854, August 24, [1854], EKK Papers.

Walter's."¹⁹ Fox was looking forward to announcing her engagement with Kane, indicating that no one had yet been told of it. "I often think dear Ly of your sacred promise, that is if all things met with your expectations. May I not tell that to my dear true friend Mrs. Walter? She will not mention it." She also boasted of her dedication to her lessons while he was gone. Clearly her goal was to please Kane. "I am getting along finely with all my studies. Are you not pleased? I shall commence German in a few weeks. Now dear Ly do I pray hurry hurry home. I will not let you go on another expedition very soon."²⁰

In this letter, which is found in Kane's papers rather than *The Love-Life of Dr. Kane*, Fox also took delight in teasing Kane, especially about their coming marriage and his insistence on secrecy. At one point she joked with him, "Ly what do you think I have done? - I have made a proposal - to - Mrs. Walter. There: you thought I meant some gentleman." Then she teased, "Some lady asked Mrs. Walter if she thought that you had any idea of marrying me. Mrs. Walter told her she thought not. If anyone should ask me that question what should I say? You say and I know it is very wrong to tell stories. I think I had better not answer the question at all."²¹ Unfortunately Kane did not return at the end of the 1854 season as Maggie Fox hoped, so the plans Fox made in the letter never transpired. The letter sat unread for over a year.

Fox was not the only one waiting for Elisha Kane's return. As the Autumn of 1854 came and went, Kane's friends began to worry. Reports reached the United States from the whaling fleet in Baffin Bay that conditions had been unusually severe the preceding winter and summer. Some began rightly to suspect that the *Advance* had become permanently frozen in.²² Would Kane become another Franklin - lost forever in the sublime Arctic regions? His friends and family hoped not, but they feared it as a

¹⁹Maggie Fox to EKK, n.d., EKK Papers.

²⁰Maggie Fox to EKK, n.d., EKK Papers.

²¹Maggie Fox to EKK, n.d., EKK Papers.

²²*Littell's Living Age*, 46 (1855), 108.

possibility. Over the winter, plans were formed for a relief mission. This time Congress was willing to contribute more generously than it ever had before for Arctic exploration, appropriating \$150,000 for the relief effort. Henry Grinnell and Judge Kane each helped prepare the mission, which also had the full support of the Navy.²³

The relief expedition was organized over the winter with a planned departure in the Spring of 1855. It consisted of two vessels, the brig *Release* and a new steam propeller, appropriately named *Arctic*. These vessels were put under the command of Lieutenant Hartstene, an experienced naval officer from South Carolina. Hartstene was no stranger to exploration. He had been part of the famed Wilkes Exploring Expedition years before, when he had served alongside Edwin DeHaven, commander of the first Grinnell Expedition, when they were both midshipmen. Hartstene was seconded on the *Release* by William Lovell, a veteran of the First Grinnell Expedition. Kane's youngest brother, Dr. John Kane, went along as surgeon to the relief expedition.²⁴

When the two vessels left New York on May 31, 1855 they took with them letters addressed to the lost explorers, who they had not seen in two years. A letter from Thomas Kane to his brother is perhaps the most interesting. Thomas was the brother with whom Elisha most often discussed his career, his ambitions, and his reputation. Tom Kane knew his older brother had ambition and often acted the role of advisor to that cause. Thus Thomas's letter focused on the progress and status of his brother's reputation at home during his absence.²⁵

Thomas informed Elisha that he had become a hero in the eyes of the American public. Interest in the explorers had increased throughout the country during their absence.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ *New York Daily Times*, June 1, 1855.

²⁵ Thomas Leiper Kane had an interesting history in his own right. During the conflict between the U.S. government and the Mormons in 1850 Thomas Kane traveled to Utah and helped keep the peace. He became known as "the friend to the Mormons." Always the most radical of the Kane brothers, he would soon abandon his Democratic roots to become a supporter of the newly formed Republican party. When the Civil War came he raised a company in Pennsylvania known as the "Bucktails."

As a result, wrote Thomas, Elisha had become "the child of your whole country and not of any part of it." Thomas told him that, though in the past the Northeast had been the region most interested in the Franklin search and most willing to contribute to Arctic exploration, that was no longer the case. In the effort to secure funds for a relief expedition, the southerners in Congress had been instrumental in getting support approved.²⁶ In the middle of the turbulent 1850s, this was one of the few issues about which the different sections agreed.

Not only was Kane now the darling of every section, continued Thomas, but also his reputation was strong with every type of American. "It has been the same with the different classes of persons," wrote Thomas. "You have had the misses of the Northern Young Ladies Seminaries with you, but you have also carried the most ugly gritty of your own naval men." Not just the medical corps of the navy, which supported him before, but the officers, too, were now his supporters and admirers. "They assert that they must rescue you as a brother officer - a gallant friend - an honor to their own corp: this has become the accepted statement of the affair, and is the footing on which it, and you thereby, must hereafter stand."²⁷

"It is all plain sailing with you now," Thomas happily declared, with an appropriate nautical metaphor. "When a nation makes a pet of a man, all it requires of him is to take his petting gracefully." Thomas wrote on, detailing the exact nature of Elisha's new reputation, which combined Humboldtian science with heroic manly style and panache. "Your tack will be the official scientific - Science with the brevet of sword, spunk, and gentlemanly savoir faire - Hurrah Horse and Head of Bureau. - Land Turtle Maury, or American Humboldt - and so forth." He then went on to advise his brother exactly how to manage this newfound reputation. "You have the chance of pushing this thing to its very farthest. - A worthy aim for the ambition of any man. But a little study of concise sham

²⁶Thomas L. Kane to EKK, May 31, 1855, EKK Papers.

²⁷Thomas L. Kane to EKK, May 31, 1855, EKK Papers.

modesty of speech in public and a composed and courteous demeanor universally, will compass more than all the geodic schemes & computations your head will ever master.” Then, with the recognition that reputations are made as much as they are earned, Thomas advised his brother to pay heed to the growing forces of American mass culture. “If as an act of grace only, remember your newspaper friends. Respect au fardeau! - It is thy who made us and not we ourselves.” He advised his brother to oblige the reporters who would meet him on his arrival home and to be generous with his acknowledgments to his colleagues.²⁸

Thomas Kane’s advice was sound. Even though he knew nothing of the progress of the actual expedition when he wrote the letter, he knew how it must be portrayed to the public for it to be a success. Elisha Kane and his crew could not arrive home in New York and tell the whole truth of the expedition. They could not tell a story of conflict, strife, and near mutiny. They had to return home as comrades. The expedition would be judged as a whole, with Kane as its personification.

* * *

On Thursday, October 11, 1855 the members of the Second Grinnell Expedition arrived in New York as passengers on board the ships sent to find them. The steamship *Union* was the first to bring the news that the survivors of the expedition were on board the *Release* and *Arctic* below Sandy Hook, approaching Manhattan Island. As the ships came up the river, word quickly spread throughout the city that the lost explorers had returned. “An army of reporters ran to the docks,” reported the *New York Daily Times* the next morning. According to *The Sun*, news of the expedition’s return “spread with rapidity through the city, while the telegraph wafted it to near and distant parts of the country.”²⁹ After making port, the members of the expedition talked to reporters on board the *Release*

²⁸Thomas L. Kane to EKK, May 31, 1855, EKK Papers.

²⁹*The Sun* (New York), October 12, 1855.

and *Arctic*, then retired, followed by the throng of reporters and curious onlookers, to the Astor Hotel.³⁰

The next morning all six columns on the front page of *The New York Daily Times* were devoted to the returned expedition. "Dr. Kane Home Again" read the head-line. The story that followed recounted the progress of the expedition, which many had given up for lost. While it acknowledged all of the returned explorers, naturally Dr. Kane, as leader, received most of the attention. The stories reported in the newspapers told of the hardships the expedition faced, and of the strange scenes and the strange people it met with in its travels. They told of the Open Polar Sea which had, they thought, at last been found, and they told of the skill and benevolence of the expedition's leader, who, according to the papers, was held in the highest esteem by all of his men. *The Herald* reported that the members of the expedition all spoke of Kane in the most complimentary terms. "Nothing was too high for his scientific research, nor too mean for his humane action. He proved himself, indeed, a model commander."³¹ *The Rochester Daily American* went even further. "Between the Doctor and his men an almost fatherly feeling seemed to exist, the looking up to him with pride and veneration, feelings which he returned by an affection for them that was truly paternal."³²

Some stories emphasized themes of American nationalism. *The New York Evening Express* boasted that the returned expedition showed the world that "Yankee enterprise and Yankee hardihood are equal to that of British navigators in the field of adventure."³³ *The New York Daily Times* also expressed its view that the whole country deserved a share of

³⁰*New York Daily Times*, October 12, 1855; Bonsall, Hayes, Sontag, and Kane, as well as three of Kane's brothers, Thomas, Robert Patterson and John are all listed as "Arrivals" at the Astor House in the *New York Evening Express*, October 12, 1855. Interestingly Henry Goodfellow was listed as an arrival at the Irving House Hotel. Whether this indicates continued bad feeling between Goodfellow and his companions is a matter of speculation.

³¹ *New York Herald*, October 13, 1855.

³² *Rochester Daily American*, October 15, 1855.

³³*New York Evening Express*, October 12, 1855.

the honors that the expedition won. Americans were proud, said the *Times*, of “the generosity, energy and heroism of American enterprise and American skill.”³⁴

Most of the reports focused on the details of the expedition. They described the sublime Arctic landscape of glaciers and ice and the inhospitable conditions of the far north. To express the intensity of the cold, many papers repeated what one of the expedition members must have told them at the Astor House: “Whiskey froze in November.”³⁵ For many reporters this one fact served to sum up the significance of what the expedition had endured.

Reports emphasized the suffering of the expedition members along with their accomplishments. Some papers acknowledged that the actual accomplishments of the expedition were slight, while others hailed the geographical discoveries of the Great Glacier of Humboldt and the Open Polar Sea as important achievements. All of the papers freely admitted that the original purpose of the expedition, the search for Franklin, had been rendered moot. Remains of the Franklin expedition had been discovered, while Kane was gone, by the Scots-Canadian overland explorer, John Rae, who had found remnants of the Franklin expedition in the possession of the Inuit in the region of the Boothia Peninsula. This was far from Smith Sound, where Kane was searching. The Inuit told Rae that all of Franklin’s crew were dead and added the unwelcome news that, in the end, the British explorers had taken to eating the flesh of their dead colleagues to survive. This was disturbing news for the pride of the British empire, but it served only to magnify the achievement of Kane’s journey for Americans. To them, Kane had set off on a brave endeavor to bring aid to a lost navigator. While he had not succeeded, he was ennobled by

³⁴*New York Daily Times*, October 13, 1855.

³⁵*The Sun* (New York), October 12, 1855; *The New York Evening Express*, October 12, 1855; *The Troy Daily Whig*, October 13, 1855; *The Public Ledger*, (Philadelphia), October 13, 1855

the attempt. That Kane, unlike Franklin, came back alive, added to his glory. The Americans had overcome where the English had descended into cannibalism.³⁶

Surprisingly, at the same time that reports celebrated Kane's expedition, many papers called for an end to Arctic voyages. The *Troy Daily Whig* approved of the expedition on humanitarian grounds and rejoiced in Kane's return, but it also called the attempt to discover a North-west Passage "ridiculous."³⁷ Many felt that only the humanitarian desire to rescue Franklin had justified American Arctic expeditions. Mere geographic curiosity was not worth the risk involved. The same article in the *New York Evening Express* that spoke with nationalistic pride of "Yankee enterprise and Yankee hardihood" also concluded that, "with the return of Dr. Kane, we presume, ends, for this generation at least, those bootless excursions to the Arctic Seas. Human life enough has been sacrificed, - all for nothing, these few years past - to render any future enterprise of the kind, ought but the merest exhibition of human fatuity."³⁸ Even the *New York Daily Times*, which was giving unprecedented coverage to the returned expedition, "hoped that we shall not have many more Arctic Expeditions."³⁹

* * *

While Dr. Kane was being heralded as a returned hero by the citizens of New York, Maggie Fox was at Ellen Walter's home at Clinton Place. She heard of Kane's arrival and heard the guns being fired on the waterfront in celebration of his return. According to Elizabeth Ellet, "All that evening, when it was known that Dr. Kane was in the city, they waited for the ring of the bell that should herald his visit."⁴⁰ But Kane did not arrive that night. Nor did he show up the next morning or all the next day. Ellen Walter, thinking that Kane must not know that Fox was in New York, sent a note to Grinnell's, where Kane

³⁶ Pierre Berton, *The Arctic Grail: The Quest for the North West Passage and the North Pole, 1818-1909*. (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1988), 266-269.

³⁷ *The Troy Daily Whig*, October 15, 1855.

³⁸ *New York Evening Express*, October 12, 1855.

³⁹ *New York Daily Times*, October 13, 1855.

⁴⁰ *Love-life of Dr. Kane*, 191.

was now staying. Meanwhile Fox, upset by Kane's neglect, went to her mother's home on Tenth Street.

Eventually word arrived for Fox that a carriage had pulled up in front of Walter's house on Clinton Place. Thinking this was Kane, she went off to see him, but when she arrived, he was not there. The visitor had been Cornelius Grinnell, sent to inform Fox that the Kane family was up in arms about rumors circulating of an engagement between Elisha and Maggie Fox. Dr. Kane would come as soon as he could. Moreover, reported Ellet, Grinnell had been sent by one of the Kanes (presumably Robert Kane, who had an eye for such detail) to "procure the letters addressed by Dr. Kane to Miss Fox, which he supposed to be in Mrs. Walter's keeping." As Fox was not there when he arrived, he did not get the letters.⁴¹

The following morning, Kane finally arrived at Mrs. Walter's home to see Maggie Fox. Understandably it had been difficult to slip away secretly from his family and his adoring admirers, so he had waited until the initial excitement of his return died down. Fox, her feelings understandably hurt at this delay, at first refused to see him, but finally she went downstairs to meet him. "The conversation was long, and Margaret listened patiently and kindly," reported Ellet, "though its purport was to inform her that all idea of their marriage must be indefinitely postponed on account of the violent opposition of Dr. Kane's family and relatives. For the present, they must be to each other only as sister and brother!" Kane then wrote out a statement which alleged that the two of them had never intended to marry, but that their relationship was "merely friendly and fraternal." He asked Fox to copy it in her own handwriting and sign it to satisfy his family. This she did, according to Ellet, since "she wished to restore peace between him and his family."⁴²

Ellet described this as a particularly dramatic scene, and she included a somewhat melodramatic dialogue between Fox, Kane, and Walter. Kane claimed that the written

⁴¹ Ibid., 193.

⁴² Ibid., 195.

statement was only to satisfy his mother. They then called in Mrs. Walter as a witness who read the note then asked, "Maggie is this so?" Fox replied in tears, "No-no-it is not so! Doctor Kane knows it is not!" Kane, angered, told her, "You are not the Maggie I took you for."⁴³ While much of this must be taken as the construction of Elizabeth Ellet for an audience that enjoyed sentimental romance, the gist of the matter was that Kane had broken off the engagement, and Fox had agreed not to hold him to his promise. These were the days when a promise of marriage was legally binding. If Maggie Fox chose to press the issue, it would have been an intolerable scandal coming at a the worst possible time for Kane's reputation. Ellet certainly had an eye toward the legal ramifications of the story, even while she presented it as a fervid romance.

All this happened in the context of Kane's attempt to ride the wave of enthusiasm generated by his return. As his brother Thomas had told him, he was now being heralded as a noble hero. His future would depend on how well he cultivated that reputation. Ellet blamed Kane's rejection of Fox on pressures from his family. She observed that Kane was financially dependent upon his father and feared a disinheritance if he married against his father's wishes. This may have been partially true, but perhaps more important to Kane was his public reception. A romantic connection or marriage with a notorious spirit-rapper could damage his reputation. He could not afford any connection which would put his judgment in doubt. Worse still would be any sort of scandal.

Fueling the growth of the antebellum penny press was a growing interest in the personal and sexual lives of public figures. Curiosity into the personal lives of famous people was quickly becoming fair game in the race for bigger newspaper sales. The sexual relationship between murdered prostitute Helen Jewett and her alleged killer had been an integral part of the penny press coverage of that notorious case. More common were stories of divorce, elopement, marital discord, abandonment and, best of all, seduction. These topics rated a small story if the people involved were ordinary citizens, but, when

⁴³ Ibid., 196.

they were publicly known figures, this sort of curiosity into private matters grew.

Recently, the highly public divorce case of the famed actor, Edwin Forrest, and his wife, Catherine, had been splattered though-out the papers, in great detail. Catherine Forrest's alleged affairs with men such as *The Home Journal* editor, Nathaniel P. Willis, were recounted in lurid and erotic detail for all to read.⁴⁴ As historian Thomas Baker has observed of the 1850s, "Now more than ever, celebrity scandal figured, along with celebrity gossip, as an engrossing form of entertainment for an audience raised to expect insight into the sinews and heart of private character."⁴⁵

Kane and his family must have feared that accounts of his own dubious relationship with a notorious spirit-rapper would find their way into the penny press. The same forces of mass culture that had made the Fox sisters a nationwide sensation, and were making Kane into a national scientific hero, could bring them both down into the depths of notoriety. Nobody wanted that.

The Kanes would have been made even more sensitive to public opinion, because Elisha was not the only member of the family in the news. His father, the judge, had recently made a highly controversial ruling in the case of an abolitionist named Passimore Williamson, accused of harboring a runaway slave. In accordance with the divisive fugitive slave laws of 1850, Judge Kane ordered Williamson to produce this missing "property." On Williamson's refusal, Judge Kane jailed him on the charge of contempt. To anti-slavery northerners this seemed to represent control of the nation's courts by the Southern "Slave Power." Throughout October and November, newspaper stories of Dr. Kane's return from the Arctic regions appeared side-by-side with stories about Judge Kane

⁴⁴ Thomas N. Baker, *Sentiment & Celebrity, Nathaniel Parker Willis and the Trials of Literary Fame*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 115-157; Norma Basch, *Framing American Divorce, From the Revolutionary Generation to the Victorians*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 172-176.

⁴⁵Baker, *Sentiment & Celebrity*, 115.

and the Passimore Williamson case. Fortunately the father's unpopularity did not seem to affect the son.⁴⁶

Rumors of Kane's connection with the notorious spirit-rapper were another matter entirely, and his fears of scandal were realized within a week of his return. On October 19 *The Troy Daily Whig* printed a seemingly innocent announcement:

DR. KANE. - A gentleman from this city informs us that Dr. Kane, of the Arctic Expedition, is soon to be married to Miss Margareta Fox, the second sister of the "Fox girls" at whose residence in Hydesville, Wayne county in this State, the spirit rappings were first manifested. Dr. K. became acquainted with the Fox family in New York. During his absence Miss Fox, his said-to-be-affianced, has been attending a young ladies' school at Philadelphia.⁴⁷

While rumors had been circulating before this announcement, this was the first public linkage between the two. As was the practice, the story was then picked up by other papers. Within a week the announcement was reprinted in *The Sun* in New York.⁴⁸

There followed a series of claims and retractions concerning the relationship, indicating various behind-the-scenes interests. On October 31, the highly respectable *New York Evening Post* brought up the rumor of an engagement but emphatically stated that "we have the best reason for saying [it] is without a shadow of foundation."⁴⁹ *The New York Daily Times* reprinted *The Post's* denial of an engagement the next day, but, two days later, reversed itself.⁵⁰ On November 3, the *Times* reported that it had been "confidently assured" that the story of an engagement was true, adding that Maggie Fox had given up spirit-rapping and, "is said to be a beautiful, pure-minded and amiable girl."⁵¹ Within two days, the *Times* once again changed its position, printing a retraction which stated that the *Post's* version was indeed correct. "The parties who so 'confidently assured' us that the *Post* was in error, have announced to us that they themselves were mistaken." The rumors

⁴⁶ George W. Corner, *Doctor Kane of the Arctic Seas*, (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1972), 225.

⁴⁷ *Troy Daily Whig*, October 19, 1855.

⁴⁸ *The Sun* [New York], October 26, 1855.

⁴⁹ *The New York Evening Post*, October 31, 1855.

⁵⁰ *The New York Daily Times*, November 1, 1855.

⁵¹ *The New York Daily Times*, November 3, 1855.

of an engagement, it declared, were "utterly unfounded."⁵² In *The Love-Life of Dr. Kane*, Ellet explained that, after the *Times* reported the rumor true, "some party furious in the Kane interest... threatened vengeance against the person who had made the assertion."⁵³ Thus the retraction.

Meanwhile, Horace Greeley at the *Tribune* expressed his distaste that all these rumors were making it into print. His reaction shows how the boundaries of reporting on the private lives of public figures were still in flux.⁵⁴ Greeley knew Maggie Fox and her whole family, and he was also a friend of Kane's brother Thomas. He had reported on the careers of both Fox and Kane frequently in his paper, but he felt that reporting on their private matters was crossing the line. Greeley made a career out of satisfying public curiosity, yet this was different. It was "impertinent curiosity." "We wish the several journals which have originated reports, *pro* and *con*, respecting the persons above named," wrote Greeley, "would consider whether they have or have not therein perverted their columns to the gratification of an impertinent curiosity." Greeley continued, "What right has the public to know anything about an 'engagement' or non-engagement between these young people?" Perhaps, he said, if the United States was an hereditary monarchy and Kane or Fox were royalty, the public might have a right to know of their plans, "but in the actual state of the case, such intimations as have appeared in the journals are not to be justified." Greeley concluded unequivocally: "Whether they have been, are, may be, are not, or will not be, 'engaged,' -can be nobody's business but their own and that of their near relatives."⁵⁵

Maggie Fox apparently agreed. The one thing which prevented a true scandal from erupting was her steadfast refusal to allow her friends to talk with reporters about her

⁵²*The New York Daily Times*, November 5, 1855.

⁵³*Love-Life*, 218.

⁵⁴For an interesting discussion of the notion of celebrity at this time and the treatment of celebrity by the press see Baker, *Sentiment & Celebrity*, *passim*.

⁵⁵*New York Tribune*, November 6, 1855.

private affairs. She, more than most, knew the power and the shortcomings of the penny press. The last thing she wanted was a public debate in the papers about her private life. No more articles asserting an engagement appeared in the papers, although denials did, suggesting that the rumors persisted in private circles. Kane's family and friends were much more willing to talk with the papers. On November 19 the "benevolent gentleman" version of Kane's relationship with Fox came to the fore. A widely reprinted article, which appeared in the *Pennsylvanian* of Philadelphia and *The New York Evening Post*, told the story Kane had so carefully fabricated before he left on his expedition.

Sometime previous to the departure of Dr. Kane on his last expedition, a subscription was started in New York by a number of liberal, kind hearted gentlemen, for the purpose of educating one of the Fox sisters, a remarkably bright, intelligent girl, and worthy of a better employment than 'spirit rapping.' Dr. Kane was applied to, and feeling somewhat interested, from pure motives of humanity, subscribed with a sailor's liberality. On his return, by invitation of the gentleman superintending her education, he called to witness the improvement of his protégé: and from this simple incident has arisen the engagement story.

The story went on to discuss the benevolent generosity of all of the men in the Kane family. The four oldest Kane men were held up as models of virtuous paternalism. Apparently Judge Kane, Thomas Kane, Robert Patterson Kane, and Dr. Kane had a history of helping the unfortunate which the writer greatly admired.⁵⁶

* * *

Despite repudiating her to his family and the wider public, Kane continued to court Fox. Many of her friends and her mother advised her not to see him anymore, but Kane pressed the issue. He told Fox that they would now be to one another as brother and sister. That way he could continue to lecture her on proper conduct, while he held on to the convenient fiction that theirs was a pure non-sexual love. Kane wanted to continue to control Fox, but was unwilling to make any sacrifices himself or go against the wishes of his family. Mrs. Fox and her daughter's friends saw that Kane was asking too much. Fearing for Maggie's reputation, they insisted that all communication between Kane and

⁵⁶*New York Evening Post*, November 19, 1855.

Fox end. Maggie seems for a time to have agreed, and she offered to Kane to return all his letters.

Kane's love letters to Fox became an important element in the drama that unfolded in the weeks and years that followed. Kane clearly worried about the letters, since they showed his true relationship to Fox. He feared their being made public, yet he was also ambivalent about asking Fox to return them, for that act would acknowledge a final break. So he waffled. When Fox offered to send him the letters, he wrote: "As to your dear generous offer of returning my letters, I tremble - not at the letters - but at the fear that you have not understood me. I have never distrusted you, or even asked for those notes. With them or without them you were always the same to me." But he also made clear that he did want them. He feared the impertinent curiosity of strangers. "I only felt and feared that suspicious, designing friends or enemies might see and abuse these letters and give me pain and trouble. I fear for them and I fear for you. I confess that their absence makes me unhappy; but as I am an honorable gentleman, I will not deprive you of them, or give you pain by requesting them." Of course, if she chose to give them to him, he would take them. "If of your own free choice you send them to me, I will regard it as the highest proof of trust and love."⁵⁷ Ellet claimed that Fox subsequently offered Kane the letters more than once, but that he refused to take them.⁵⁸

During the winter, Kane was able once again to insinuate himself into the good graces of the Fox family and make regular visits to Maggie. Despite periodic objections by Mrs. Fox and Maggie's friends, by April the two renewed their engagement. According to Ellet, Kane declared that he "cared no longer... for the world's opinion or its sneers," but he also insisted once again on secrecy, telling none but the Fox family of the renewed engagement.⁵⁹

⁵⁷*Love-Life*, 212-213.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 213.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 228.

The renewed engagement was on a more intimate basis than their previous relationship. The main source for this period is *The Love-Life of Dr. Kane*, and Ellet is careful to say nothing to suggest anything scandalous, but there are indications that the two began to spend more time alone together. Fox had moved back into her mother's home in New York, where Kate continued to hold seances. While these were going on, Kane and Fox often retreated to a third floor room which Fox had set up as a parlor. One can only speculate whether this ever evolved into a sexual relationship, but the surviving evidence indicates that Kane was driven more by a desire for control than for sex. As in his dealings with his men on the expedition and the Inuit of Smith Sound, Kane's overriding desire was to have others recognize his benevolent authority. He wanted Maggie Fox to give up control to him. In this he was largely successful, since Fox in turn wanted the stability and respectability that he offered. To her, he represented an alternative to the ethical and social ambiguity of her spirit-rapping career. To attain respectability, however, she had to give up much of the freedom she had known as a spirit-rapper.

* * *

It was no coincidence that the story of Kane and Fox's relationship became public little more than a week after his return from the Arctic. Stories about Kane appeared in the newspapers regularly for much of the Fall and into the Winter. Most dealt with the results of the expedition, but Kane had become a celebrity, so any story about him was of interest. Now that he was safely home, papers had fun recounting a story of his supposed death that had appeared in a Boston paper just days before his return.⁶⁰ Another paper jokingly recounted a story of a spiritualist who had claimed months before to have communicated with Kane's spirit.⁶¹ Many stories described the various honors being bestowed upon him. The Press Club gave a dinner in his honor.⁶² He met with the president. He and his

⁶⁰*The Sun* [New York], October 13, 1855.

⁶¹*Rochester Daily American*, October 25, 1855.

⁶²*The Public Ledger* [Philadelphia], October 26, 1855.

officers were photographed by Matthew Brady.⁶³ Even Kane's dog, "Toodles," became the object of public curiosity. "Poor Toodles had a narrow escape!" wrote the *Troy Daily Whig*. As the survivors of the expedition were traveling by open boat on Baffin Bay, they were running out of food. Toodles was the last remaining dog, and the men were hungry. "The pistol was already loaded, and the stew pan prepared which was to convert the shaggy body of Toodles into a savory ragout, when Providential interference! one of the party made his appearance with a seal which he had just captured." Thus Toodles survived.⁶⁴

Kane had reached a new plateau of celebrity. In the past, for Kane and Fox, the phenomena of the Arctic and of knockings had been primary. Upon Kane's return from his second Arctic voyage his personal celebrity became paramount. Any story about him, his expedition, or even his dog, was interesting. The press moved from stories about his expedition to stories about his private life. His earlier exploits in India, Africa, and the Philippines were now rehashed for the general public. His became a modern version of celebrity which moved beyond his actual achievements and focused instead, with sometimes "impertinent curiosity," upon his personality and private life.

This was not an unforeseeable result of his earlier attempts to cultivate a reputation by mixing his science with sensation. The antebellum era's culture of curiosity tried to combine education and progress with entertainment and sensation, but such an effort could also lead to the celebration of a personality over knowledge.⁶⁵ Whether he liked it or not, Kane's private life was just as much a part of his public reputation as was his geology, botany or oceanography.

⁶³*New York Herald*, October 20, 1855.

⁶⁴*The Troy Daily Whig*, October 24, 1855.

⁶⁵ This general theme is discussed in Thomas Bender, *Intellect and Public Life: Essays on the Social History of Academic Intellectuals in the United States*, (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993), 3-46.

CHAPTER NINE

BECOMING A HERO OF SCIENCE

When Elisha Kane returned to his native shores in the Autumn of 1855, few would have guessed that he had less than a year and a half to live. Kane's health had always been poor, but he returned from the Arctic in better than normal condition. He commented to one friend. "My health is almost absurd: I have grown like a walrus."¹ He seemed fit and ready to embark on a new phase of his life.

His chief priority at this time, when not embroiled in romantic escapades with Margaret Fox, was to write an account of the Second Grinnell Expedition. He wanted to capitalize upon the attention given to the expedition's belated return by writing a narrative that would place him among the famed Arctic explorers of his day. In fact, he had begun to edit his journal from the expedition on board the rescue ship, *Release*, even before arriving in New York.

Soon he had a publisher as well. Judge Kane, who helped manage his son's business affairs, had not been satisfied with the handling of Kane's first book by Harper Brothers. That book had done reasonably well, and was praised by the likes of George Templeton Strong, who wrote in his diary that the first book was "far more attractive than any narrative of northern voyages and discovery that I've met."² But the Judge and the Doctor decided to try a different publisher this time, Childs & Peterson of Philadelphia.³

¹ George Elder, *Biography of Elisha Kent Kane*, (Philadelphia: Childs and Peterson, 1858), 215.

² George Templeton Strong, *The Diary of George Templeton Strong, The Turbulent Fifties, 1850-1859*, Allan Nevins and Milton Halsey Thomas eds. (New York: The MacMillan Company, 1952), 165.

³ George W. Corner, *Doctor Kane of the Arctic Seas*, (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1972), 230-231.

Meanwhile, a curious public was impatiently awaiting the narrative. Notices about the coming publication began to appear in the papers as early as November 1855, less than a month after the expedition returned. The *Public Ledger* of Philadelphia reported Kane's contract with Childs & Peterson and described the contents of the anticipated account. It was to be a personal narrative, rather than a scientific treatise. Kane called it "a centre-table book, fit as well for the eyes of children as of refined women."⁴ It would also include "a variety of scientific papers, and be illustrated with maps and several hundred engravings."⁵ These engravings were being prepared by a well-known artist, James Hamilton, from sketches drawn by Kane.

Apparently no expense would be spared in the production of the two octavo volumes. The estimated cost was placed at \$20,000 by *The Public Ledger*.⁶ Later reports, on the eve of publication the following autumn, reported that Childs & Peterson had already signed up 30,000 advance subscribers. Gambling that the book would be very popular, they planned to print 100,000 copies for the first edition.⁷ Their confidence was well founded. Within the next few years the book sold close to 150,000 copies.⁸

Arctic Explorations in the Years 1853, '54, '55 became Elisha Kane's greatest legacy. Eagerly anticipated, it was even more eagerly consumed. Kane told the story of long dark winters amidst a strange and forbidding Arctic landscape. He told of the suffering of the men from scurvy and frozen toes and fingers, and how they all were kept alive that second winter after he negotiated a treaty with the band of Greenlanders at Etah. Kane's book provided interesting and amusing ethnographic details about the lives of these

⁴Elder, *Biography*, 216.

⁵*The Public Ledger* (Philadelphia), November 9, 1855.

⁶*The Public Ledger* (Philadelphia), December 15, 1855.

⁷*The Knickerbocker*, 48 (October 1856), 417.

⁸For sales figures see Carl Bode, *The Anatomy of American Popular Culture, 1840-1861*, (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1983), 223; Jeannette Mirsky, *Elisha Kent Kane and the Seafaring Frontier*, (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1954), 180.

strange "Esquimaux," and it portrayed the dedicated process of gathering scientific data on tides, temperature, and other natural phenomena on a daily basis in harsh Arctic conditions.

More interesting for readers, however, *Arctic Explorations* told the story of the expedition's small, often sickly, young commander who used his medical knowledge, ingenuity, and perseverance to bring all but three of his men home alive. *Arctic Explorations* was the story of a young leader who faced amazing hardships and overcame a hostile nature. Readers learned about a man who had been raised with every advantage of class and position, who gave it all up for the sake of advancing human knowledge. Rather than a story of a failed mission that left three men dead for no tangible results, readers got a story about a noble quest, in which a small group of men triumphed over adversity. The attempt to find Franklin and to sail upon the Open Polar Sea had failed, but antebellum Americans could still find value in the sacrifices made in what seemed a virtuous cause.

Arctic Explorations followed the same general pattern as Kane's first book, *The U.S. Grinnell Expedition*. It covered a whole range of both practical and scientific subjects within the context of a narrative of exploration. As one reviewer noted, "The monotony of events connected with a winter in the Arctic regions is a good deal relieved in Dr. Kane's work by the little vignettes that illustrate such simple topics as storing provisions, training dogs, and drawing sledges."⁹ In both books, Kane satisfied his readers' curiosity about countless aspects of the Arctic region and described in detail what they did and how they survived. But *Arctic Explorations* also differed from Kane's earlier work in two important regards. First of all, he added ethnography to the list of sciences he considered. Kane had barely encountered the Inuit on his first voyage, but on the second they played a central role. Detailed descriptions of Inuit life made up some of the most interesting parts of the book. Second, Kane intensified his emphasis on human suffering in the face of a terrifying, yet wonderful, landscape. While danger and suffering had been a part of the

⁹*Littell's Living Age*, 52 (February 1857), 330.

first expedition, it could not compare with what the second expedition endured. Popular interest in Kane's expedition, in large part, revolved around the explorers' suffering in the face of unprecedented adversity.

* * *

On the second expedition, Kane and his men came to know the Native Greenlanders intimately. His descriptions of these people was marked by light-hearted condescension. He combined sincere admiration with contempt, seemingly unaware of the contradiction between the racist ideology of nineteenth century America and the obvious fact that his expedition owed its survival to the knowledge and skill of these northern hunters.

Unlike earlier Arctic explorers, Kane had planned from the very start of the expedition to emulate Inuit ways as much as possible. He freely acknowledged this to his readers. While the Royal Navy continued to dress in woolens during Arctic exploring expeditions, Kane and his men adopted the Inuit dress of furs. Like the Inuit, Kane planned to use dogs rather than men to haul sledges. Rather than relying solely on stored provisions, Kane planned to supplement their diet as much as possible with nutritious fresh meat. British expeditions hunted mainly for sport on their expeditions. Kane planned to hunt for food as the Inuit did. That was why he hired Hans Hendrik. In *Arctic Explorations*, Kane explained to his readers the advantages of Inuit ways. Furs were warmer, dogs had more endurance, fresh meat helped ward off scurvy.

In the face of harsh Arctic conditions, Kane explained, he and his men emulated Inuit ways more closely as time passed. During their second winter they packed the cabin in the *Advance* with moss, converting it into an imitation of the stone structures in Etah. Kane and the others often joined the Inuit in hunting seals and walrus. He even took to

eating his meat raw as the Inuit did. By the final spring in the Arctic, Kane even remarked, "we are now more than half Esquimaux."¹⁰

Kane readily acknowledged the debt the expedition owed to the Inuit, but he retained the basic assumption of a dichotomy between savage and civilized life. Because the Arctic landscape was itself a savage region, Kane and his men needed to take advantage of the skills of the savage men who inhabited it in order to survive. At the same time, Kane explained, the Greenlanders of Smith Sound were a backward people headed toward eventual extinction. At one point he observed, "they are a declining - almost an obsolete - people."¹¹ He spoke condescendingly of their filthy ways and portrayed them as a childlike and thieving lot - physically, intellectually, and morally inferior to the Americans. Thus Kane managed to hold on to his basic faith in white supremacy, despite extraordinary evidence to the contrary. One British reviewer noted the contradiction when he doubted Kane's belief in "the superior endurance of the white race," pointing out that Kane's men, "with superior shelter and better resources than the Esquimaux, [were] perishing away, where the Esquimaux were thriving."¹² Americans, however, seemed not to notice this contradiction.¹³

Kane repeatedly criticized the Inuit for being improvident, which is astonishing considering how often he had to go to them for food. He noted that they never stored food, and, as a result, often had to endure famine. There were times of plenty, as when they collected birds who nested by the thousands in nearby cliffs in the summertime, but these were not taken advantage of, according to Kane, to store food for the scarce months of

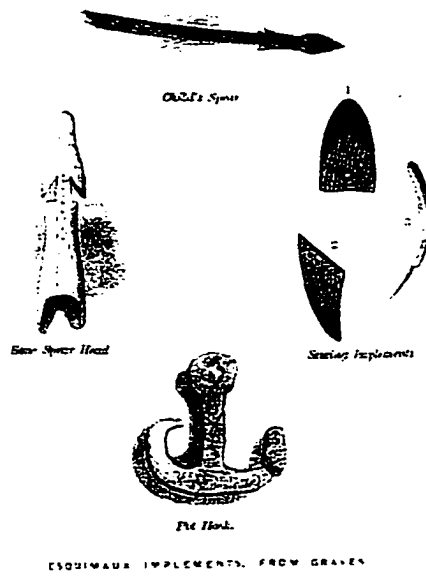
¹⁰ Kane, *Arctic Explorations*, II, 98.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 119.

¹² *Littell's Living Age*, 52 (February 1857), 331.

¹³ On Kane's racial attitudes toward the Inuit see Barry Alan Joyce, "As the Wolf From the Dog: American Overseas Exploration and the Compartmentalization of Humankind: 1838-1859," (Ph.D. dissertation, University of California, Riverside, 1995), 328-359.

Figure 9



SNOW-MELTER, ANOATOK.

Aspects of Inuit culture from *Arctic Explorations*.

Figure 10



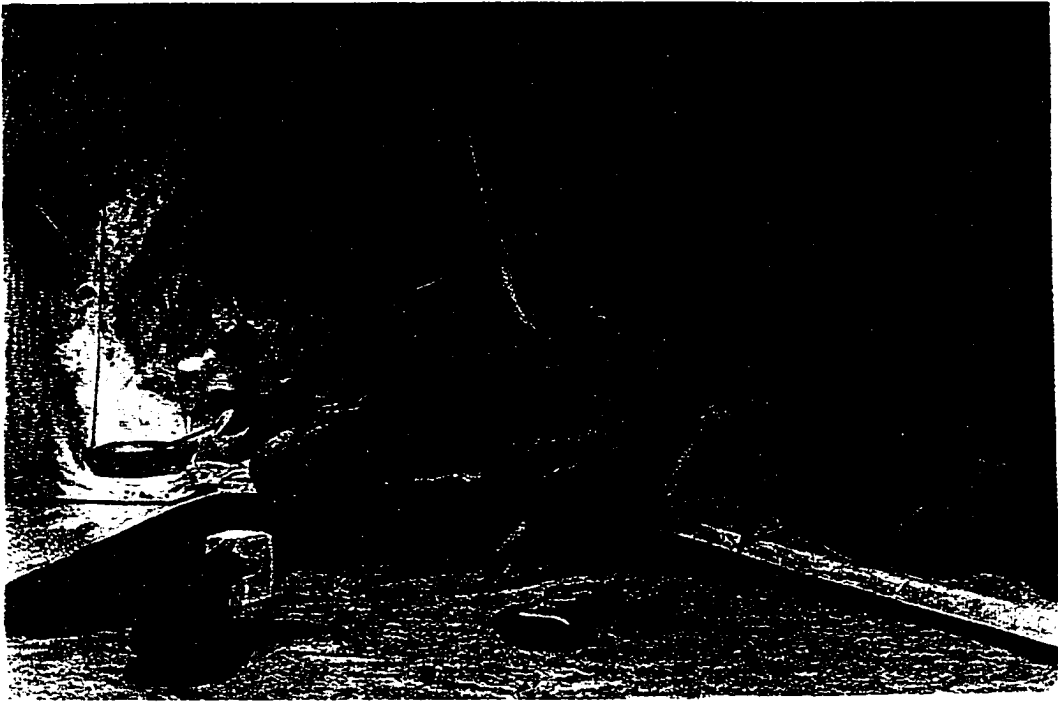
PAULIK, METEK'S NEPHEW.



ANINGNA.

Inuit Portraits from *Arctic Explorations*.
Clockwise from top-left: Aningnah, Metik, Aningna, Paulik.

Figure 11



CHILDREN PLAYING BALL.

Scenes of Inuit domestic life from *Arctic Explorations*.
(Top) "Life in the Esquimaux Iglooe."
(Bottom) "Children Playing Ball."

winter.¹⁴ Kane does not explain why, despite the benefits of American planning, the Inuit usually had more food than he did.

Despite his ethnocentric notions, by the time the explorers left for their journey south, Kane reflected upon the friendships they had formed with the northern hunters. He guided his readers to feel pity, rather than contempt, for the Native Greenlanders. "My heart warms to these poor, dirty, miserable, yet happy beings, so long our neighbors, and of late so staunchly our friends."¹⁵ He continued, "whatever may have been the faults of these Esquimaux heretofore, stealing was the only grave one. Treachery they may have conceived," noted Kane, "but the day of this has passed away." He concluded, "God knows that since they professed friendship, albeit the imaginary powers of the angekok-soak and the marvelous six-shooter which attested them may have had their influence, never have friends been more true."¹⁶

Those who read Kane's narrative were delighted by the tales of these quaint friends Kane had found amidst the icebergs. *The North American Review* devoted seven pages to the Inuit in its joint review of Kane's narrative and that of the Royal Navy captain, Sir Edward Belcher.¹⁷ Other reviewers did not fail to mention the unusual appearance and habits of the "Esquimaux" who, like the polar bear and the iceberg, were a part of the strange and wonderful Arctic landscape.

While for Kane and his men, knowledge of Inuit ways was a matter of life and death, for his readers back home the Inuit provided the thrill of a spectacle. Unlike the explorers, who merely ventured into the Arctic for brief explorations, the Inuit lived, raised families and died in the North. Theirs was a domestic world, familiar yet unfamiliar to the domestic world at home where Kane's book was consumed. Mentally venturing into the lives of these people allowed readers the voyeuristic thrill of experiencing Arctic life from

¹⁴*Arctic Explorations*, II, 202-204.

¹⁵*Ibid.*, 248.

¹⁶*Ibid.*, 250.

¹⁷*North American Review*, 84 (January 1857), 110-116.

the safety of their own parlors. With Kane as one's guide, one could venture out on a cultural excursion into the unfamiliar. One could experience the savage without ever leaving home.

* * *

Kane's narrative of the second expedition also emphasized danger and suffering more than his first narrative. *Arctic Explorations* was a story of a small man with a small crew who ventured off in a little wooden brig to confront the worst nature had to offer. The David and Goliath aspect of it appealed to antebellum readers. Kane emphasized his own insignificance and impotence in the face of nature. He triumphed over nature, not with his own superior power, but by using his wits, and, more importantly, trusting in Providence to deliver him in the end. His emphasis was always on the grandeur of the polar regions in contrast to the insignificance of himself and his men.

As literary scholars Chauncey Loomis and Francis Spufford have keenly observed, to British and American readers, the Arctic was characterized by the sublime.¹⁸ The sublime, as understood by the romantics, was awe inspiring beauty on a grand scale. The sublime was unfamiliar, but it inspired passionate and often horrifying emotions. The strange vastness of the Arctic was certainly sublime. It had beauty and grandeur. It inspired awe, yet it also inspired terror. The Arctic landscape was magnificent, yet it also threatened imminent death to those who ventured into it. Through a compelling narrative and beautiful engravings, Kane presented his readers with a magnificent kind of terror that thrilled them to the bone.

Elisha Kane knew how to tell a good story. One reviewer noted that "the scenes which [*Arctic Explorations*] describes are so vividly and vigorously brought before the reader, that there are few who sit down to the perusal of the narrative but will fancy, before

¹⁸Francis Spufford, *I May Be Some Time: Ice and the English Imagination*, (London: Faber and Faber, 1996), 16-40; Chauncey Loomis, "The Arctic Sublime," in *Nature and the Victorian Imagination*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1977), 95-112.

they rise from the engrossing occupation, their own flesh paralyzed by the cold 100 degrees greater than frost, and their blood scurvy-filled by the four months' sunlessness."¹⁹ Another called Kane's narrative "among the most stirring and the most fearful that have yet been recorded."²⁰ This same reviewer continued. "It is without comparison the most painfully interesting record of experience in wintering in the Far North that has ever yet been published."²¹

"Painful" is not usually a compliment, but, for readers of *Arctic Explorations*, the pain was a moral pleasure. The lesson they took away was that suffering in the face of adversity brought forth the most noble aspects of human character. In this sense, *Arctic Explorations* was a morality play, a modern *Pilgrim's Progress*. Like Christian, Kane underwent trials and tribulations, but grew morally stronger as the result. Many reviewers commented upon this. "The Arctic search has been, in more respects than one, the school of character," wrote one in *The North American Review*. "It has shown what charm there is in perilous adventure to the human mind. Its dangers have been great, its hardships severe. It is remarkable to see what courage and capacity of calm endurance they have developed."²² Similarly, *The New York Daily Times* observed, "If we are to look for heroic and unsullied adventure anywhere at this time of day, we may search for it in the privations and purity of the atmosphere north of seventy degrees of latitude. There folly, we should think, would wither, and effeminacy expire."²³ Kane's suffering was authentic, it was noble, and it was selfless, not like the tawdry commercialism and political strife of the antebellum homefront.

* * *

¹⁹*Littell's Living Age*, 52 (March 1857), 485.

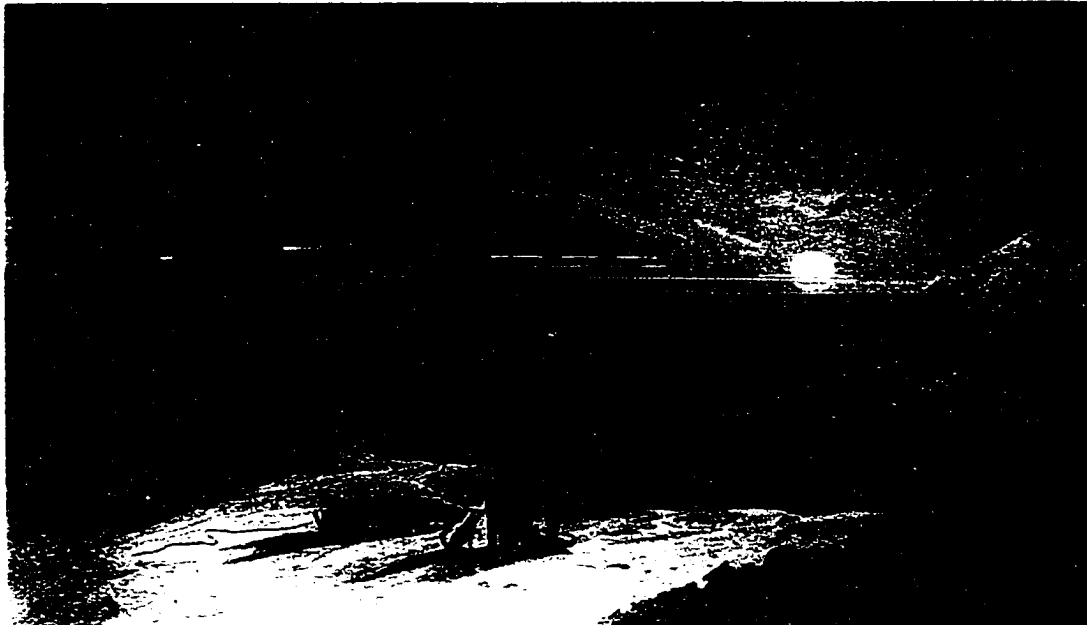
²⁰*Littell's Living Age*, 52 (February 1857), 329.

²¹*Littell's Living Age*, 52 (February 1857), 334.

²²*North American Review*, 84 (January 1857), 116-117.

²³*The New York Daily Times*, February 25, 1857.

Figures 12 & 13



Engravings from *Arctic Explorations*.

(Top) "The Open Water from Cape Jefferson."

(Bottom) "The Look Out from Cape George Russell."

Figures 14 & 15



Engravings from *Arctic Explorations*.
(Top) "Ice Bergs Near Kosoak."
(Bottom) "Great Glacier of Humboldt."

Figures 16 & 17



Scenes of the escape to the south. From *Arctic Explorations*.
(Top) "The Broken Floes."
(Bottom) "The Escape off Weary Men's Rest."

Needless to say, Kane had not copied his journals for publication without some serious editing. Had he not, his readers would have known that suffering had brought out the worst as well as the best in Kane and his men. Kane obscured the personal strife that had plagued the expedition. He removed all critical references to his fellow officers. He omitted his dissatisfaction with John Wilson and Henry Goodfellow and his conflicts with Carl Petersen. Of course he could not ignore the part of the story when half his crew had abandoned him and the brig to try to escape their icy prison in the fall of 1854, but he could interpret it as he saw fit. Gone are his fantasies of administering a beating to Sontag and Hayes. Kane was careful to hide his own resentment of what he thought of as betrayal at the time. Instead, he presented the officers of the withdrawal party as wayward children, who ran into trouble because they did not follow their commander's advice, but were welcomed back into the fold upon their return. Hayes, Sontag, and Petersen all played prodigal sons to Kane's forgiving father.

Unfortunately the crew did not all receive the same kind treatment in *Arctic Explorations* as the officers. Blake and Godfrey were portrayed as dangerous and unpredictable men who often taxed their benevolent commander's patience. Godfrey bore the brunt of Kane's criticism, as if he alone had been a source of conflict and dissension within an otherwise happy and obedient crew. This was what motivated Godfrey to respond with his own narrative that portrayed himself in a better light. Kane's narrative was aimed at a middle-class readership concerned about controlling the lower orders. Kane presented his own attempts to control Godfrey's behavior as a microcosm of the problems of a democratic society. How can a benevolent democratic leader control his followers without resorting to force? In *Arctic Explorations*, Godfrey played the part of the unruly child - not fit to govern himself, yet unwilling to be governed by others. He represents the potential problem of a democratic society where the lower orders fail to see the wisdom in deferring to their betters.

Kane's self-presentation in *Arctic Exploration* did not demonstrate the kind of leader he actually was, but rather the kind of leader he wished himself to be. This is probably why it appealed so much to antebellum readers. He portrayed himself as a benevolent paternal leader, admired and respected by his men. The reader witnesses him giving the men confidence when they were in doubt, caring for them when they were ill, and instructing them when they needed knowledge. In his book, he led by example rather than by force. He appealed to their reason, and they followed him accordingly. He seemed the epitome of the democratic leader whose authority derived from his own superior abilities and skill. This was an ideal that existed in the minds of both Southern slave holders and northern employers of the antebellum era, even if it did not exist in reality. Kane, in effect, successfully created in his writing the kind of paternalistic relationship he so often failed to create in real life.

Readers were drawn to the Kane they read about, seeing him as a morally upstanding example of true manhood. *The North American Review* noted, "No more gallant crew can be found than the company of Dr. Kane, and there could be no braver or better commander."²⁴ *The New York Daily Times* reviewer read *Arctic Explorations* "as a revelation of the genius of the man - for there was no mistaking the personal qualities which lived half masked behind the words. The sentences stood succinct, girt, the phrases of a man who lived in action.... There was not a particle of literary confectionery, but every page glittered with the transparent frost-work of the scenery which had inspired it."²⁵ Kane's words seemed to ring with the truth of authentic experience. It was art without artifice - or so his readers thought.²⁶

²⁴*The North American Review*, 84 (January 1857), 117.

²⁵*The New York Daily Times*, February 25, 1857.

²⁶On the importance of such sincerity in antebellum America see Karen Halttunen, *Confidence Men and Painted Women: A Study of Middle-Class Culture in America, 1830-1870*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1982).

There were a few voices of dissent, but they came mostly from the far side of the Atlantic. Some argued that Kane's claim that the Open Polar Sea theory had been proved was premature. They rightly observed that what Morton and Hendrik had seen could have been a mere temporary local area of open water. Most critics, however, argued this point with respect. A greater criticism of Kane came from the *North British Review*, in an article reprinted in America in *Eclectic Magazine*. This review zeroed in on Kane's account of his troubles with Godfrey. It noted that much of Godfrey's behavior was viewed by Kane "through the eyes of his imagination." Godfrey seemed to them to have been a valuable member of the expedition. Of Kane's attempt to shoot Godfrey, the article noted that Kane was lucky he did not succeed, for then he would be liable for prosecution for murder.²⁷ Such criticism, however, was the exception. Most observers on both sides of the Atlantic continued to admire Kane.

* * *

Kane finished writing *Arctic Explorations* in the late summer of 1856. Unfortunately, the uncharacteristically robust health he had enjoyed upon the expedition's return had not lasted. As the book was going to press in September, he wrote to his publisher, "The book, poor as it is, has been my coffin."²⁸ Toward the end of the summer, with work on the book done, he retired to a homeopathic spa in Brattleboro, Vermont to try to regain his health, but he had too much to do to lie idle for long.²⁹ He did not yet know how much of a success his book was going to be, so at the time he seemed surrounded by troubles.

One of these troubles was Wilson, the most discontented of his former officers, who was threatening to write a book of his own, one that Kane was vehemently trying to

²⁷*Eclectic Magazine of Foreign Literature, Science, and Art*, 40 (April 1857), 448-449.

²⁸Elder, *Biography*, 218.

²⁹Corner, *Doctor Kane*, 242.

suppress.³⁰ There was also conflict in Congress over a bill proposing to purchase a number of copies of Kane's book to distribute to libraries, as had been done to help the sales of previous narratives of government-sponsored exploring expeditions. The problem was that the Second Grinnell expedition had been privately funded. Afraid of the precedent this would set, the bill was rejected, though not without controversy. Kane's many admirers saw this as an insult to Kane and his expedition.

There was also continued discussion of further Arctic voyages, much of it inspired by the unexpected appearance of an abandoned Royal Navy ship, *Resolute*, in Baffin Bay. The *Resolute* was found aimlessly drifting in the bay by an American whaling ship. The previous year, while locked in the pack ice in Lancaster Sound, it had been abandoned by Captain Henry Kellett of Sir Edward Belcher's searching squadron. Its officers and crew had then returned to England on board Belcher's other ships. It was thus a great embarrassment to the Royal Navy when the ship turned up intact the following year in Baffin Bay, having made the journey out of Lancaster Sound without the benefit of its British crew. The American government bought the derelict ship from the whaling captain who found it, and then in an act of gallantry, and with, perhaps, a little smug satisfaction, offered to return it as a gift to the Queen and British people.³¹

Lady Jane Franklin, who had not yet given up the hope of finding more evidence of her lost husband, saw this as an opportunity. Her last appeals to the Admiralty to send out yet another expedition to search for further remains of her husband's lost expedition had been rejected on the grounds that no ship was available. The true reason, however, was that the Admiralty had realistically given up all hope of finding any survivors of the expedition and had removed Franklin and his officers from the Navy lists. But now there

³⁰EKK to John K. Kane, September 2, 1856; September 30, 1856; "Tuesday;" EKK Papers.

³¹Pierre Berton, *The Arctic Grail: The Quest for the North West Passage and the North Pole, 1818-1909*, (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1988), 259-263.

was a ship, tested in Arctic conditions, which Lady Franklin hoped to put to her own use. She also thought she knew the best person to send as its commander in case the Admiralty refused to provide officers: the bold American Navy doctor who had recently returned from Smith Sound.³²

Kane was clearly flattered by Lady Franklin's faith in him, and he wanted to help her cause as best he could. Despite his failing health, he resolved to journey to England to promote another expedition. In the second week of October 1856 he left for England from New York on board the steamer *Baltic*, accompanied by his steward, William Morton, who remained his most faithful follower.³³

* * *

Margaret Fox had spent much of August and September, with her mother and Kate, visiting relatives in Canada, but by the end of September she was back in New York, as was Kane. In *The Love Life of Dr. Kane*, Elizabeth Ellet relates that one day in early October, Kane came to Mrs. Fox's home on Twenty-second street. He planned to take Fox to get her photograph taken. A few times before this, according to Ellet, Kane had, in private, called Maggie Fox his wife. On this day he did as well. "[Y]ou know you are my own - my wife!" he told her. Then, according to Ellet, he said, "Would you like me to repeat what I have said, formally, in the presence of your mother? Such a declaration, in the presence of witnesses, is sufficient to constitute a legal and binding marriage; a marriage as firm as if the ceremony took place before a magistrate. Attend to me, Maggie; listen: would you be willing *now* to enter into such a bond?"³⁴ Fox consented, and in front of Mrs. Fox, Kate, a servant, and "a young lady who was spending the evening there." Kane declared, "Maggie is my wife, and I am her husband." Fox then agreed. In case this was not convincing enough, Ellet provided a footnote to the *Love-Life* with numerous

³²Corner, *Doctor Kane*, 239-241; Berton, *Arctic Grail*, 313-314.

³³Elder, *Biography*, 231.

³⁴*The Love-Life of Dr. Kane*, (New York: George Carleton, 1865), 269.

citations from legal authorities and court precedents that such a declaration constituted a legal marriage contract.³⁵ A few days later, on October 11, Kane left for England, promising that the marriage would be made public in May. Unfortunately May never came for Elisha Kane, so we are left with rather tenuous evidence that the marriage ever took place at all.

* * *

Kane arrived in Liverpool on October 22, and moved on to London three days later, where he visited with noted scientists such as Roderick Murchison and Edward Sabine and met frequently with Jane Franklin. His health was failing fast. He could not really participate in English scientific society the way he wished, so instead he retired to a private residence outside London. By the middle of November, he was consulting doctors who recommended a warmer climate. He considered making his way to southern Europe, but instead chose Cuba, since it was nearer to home. With Morton, he took passage from Southampton to St. Thomas where he waited over two weeks before taking another ship to Cuba on December 20th. As the ship neared Cuba, Kane's condition was deteriorating. He experienced paralysis in his right arm and leg, from which he slowly recovered in a few days.³⁶

Arriving in Havana on the 25th, he was met by his brother Thomas, who had come down from Philadelphia to be with him. About two weeks later his mother and his brother, John, also arrived in Havana. Apparently the family was becoming aware that this was more than just another of Elisha's temporary bouts with ill health. For the next month his health fluctuated. At times he could get out of his bed at Mrs. Almy's Hotel and move around a bit. At these times he made plans to return home, but then he would suffer a

³⁵Ibid., 269-271. My own sense is that there might be some embellishment of the basic story here. Kane undoubtedly made many promises of eventual marriage, and may even have called Fox his wife in front of witnesses in her family. Whether the scene was actually as formal as Ellet described is debatable.

³⁶Elder, *Biography*, 232-239; Corner, *Doctor Kane*, 245-249.

relapse and be confined to his bed to be tended by Morton and his mother. On February 10th he was "seized with 'apoplexy'" which again paralyzed him. "He was not unconscious nor insensible;" wrote William Elder, "only paralyzed, with the power of emotional expression left, the power to indicate his sympathies, sufferings, and wants." Finally on February 16 he died.³⁷

* * *

The public reaction to Kane's death was immediate. The degree of public mourning for the departed explorer clearly shows how far Kane's reputation had advanced in the last years of his life. At his death, he was one of the most admired men in the country, a symbol of American ideals of virtue. The day after his death, between two and three hundred American citizens in Havana, "men of respectability from almost every State in the Union" met "for the purpose of agreeing upon some public demonstration of respect to the memory of the intrepid Arctic navigator."³⁸ In doing so they set a precedent that would be repeated across the United States.

At 7:30 in the morning, February 20th a large group of Americans, and some from other countries, met the corpse of Kane as it was brought out of Mrs. Army's Hotel. A procession of from six to eight hundred people then accompanied the body to the Plaza de Armas, where they were joined by representatives of the Havana government, members of "various learned bodies," and a military band. This procession proceeded to the waterfront, where the remains were put on a barge solemnly decorated for the occasion. The boats of every American ship in the harbor, in addition to those of other nations, joined in a floating procession up the harbor where "every American vessel, and indeed nearly all of those of every other country, had their colors hoisted half mast high."³⁹

³⁷Elder, *Biography*, 240-241; Corner, *Doctor Kane*, 249-250.

³⁸*The New York Herald*, February 27, 1857.

³⁹*Ibid.*

The body was taken to the steamer, *Cahawba*, on which it would travel back to the United States, accompanied by Kane's mother and two brothers, who had tended him on his death-bed. After appropriate speeches by both Cuban and American representatives, the *Cahawba* departed.⁴⁰ It arrived in New Orleans three days later, on the morning of February 22, 1857. With the arrival of Kane's remains in the United States, word of his death spread throughout the country by telegraph. Meanwhile, the New Orleans city authorities began to organize. The honor they showed the departed explorer showed unparalleled admiration for a man most of them had never met. Mourners carried the body to the City Hall, where it lay in state overnight under a guard of honor. The next day the remains were taken by a military escort "and followed by a concourse of citizens, military officers, the city authorities, the Masonic fraternity, and the Keystone Association, were borne through some of our principle streets to the levee, and there placed on board the steamboat *Woodruff*, for Louisville, en route to Philadelphia."⁴¹ As this procession passed through the streets of New Orleans, crowds gathered to pay their last respects. Between five and seven thousand observers came to see the procession, indicating the broad-based interest in the departed explorer. Along the route and at the port, homes and businesses displayed flags at half-mast, and on Lafayette Square a detachment of artillery fired their guns at fifteen-minute intervals as a token of respect.⁴² As the body of the explorer proceeded home, *The New Orleans Evening Delta* observed, "Strange that even the corpse of the Arctic wanderer is traveling still. Poor Kane was a true martyr to science, and there is a genuine sanctity in his coffin, worth the prestige of a thousand conquerors."⁴³ Here was expressed a theme which would emerge frequently in the course of Kane's journey home: Kane was a hero, but his heroism was based on science, not war.

⁴⁰Ibid.

⁴¹*The Daily Picayune*, (New Orleans), February 25, 1857.

⁴²Ibid.

⁴³*The New Orleans Evening Delta*, February 23, 1857.

The *Woodruff* made its way up the Mississippi and Ohio Rivers, passing Cairo on the morning of March third. In spots, spectators lined the banks of the river to watch the funeral procession pass by. In Louisville, the Mayor and Order of Free Masons prepared for Kane's arrival. When the *Woodruff* arrived, the body was carried amidst great fanfare to Mozart Hall, where it lay in state overnight. The next day it was taken across the river to New Albany, Indiana, where a committee from Cincinnati took charge of the body, bringing it by steamboat to that city. All this was accompanied by solemn addresses by members of special committees from Louisville, New Albany and Cincinnati.⁴⁴ These committees were made up of the first citizens of these cities, who felt that the honor of their communities depended on the respect they showed the remains of the departed explorer. Throughout the funeral journey, the ceremonies were organized by America's elite male citizens, yet the newspapers consistently pointed out that the spectators who came to mourn Kane were from the working class as well as the wealthy, and women as well as men.

Mourners carried Kane's body in a procession through the streets of Cincinnati, and some of the city's most respected citizens gave speeches in memory of the deceased. They then accompanied the remains to the depot of the Little Miami Railroad Company, where they were placed on a railroad express car for its journey to Columbus.⁴⁵ The citizens of Columbus planned to honor Kane's memory "as a proud and dauntless warrior of science."⁴⁶ The body arrived on Saturday evening and was brought to the Capitol Senate Chamber, where it lay in state over the Sabbath. On Sunday morning the Chamber was opened to the public, but the crowd was so large that barely half of those wishing entrance to the hall could be accommodated. A minister delivered a sermon, and mourners said prayers and sang a hymn dedicated to the memory of this "hero of science and discovery." From two to five in the afternoon, the Chamber remained opened to visitors.

⁴⁴Elder, *Biography*, 309.

⁴⁵*Ibid.*, 315-320.

⁴⁶*The Ohio Statesman* (Columbus), March 6, 1857.

“and throughout the afternoon, the living tide, flowing and ebbing, was constant: and with saddened hearts and bowed heads all passed around the bier, in the melancholy tribute that genius and worth, unsullied by blemish, nor tainted by reproach, can alone command.”⁴⁷

As the corpse neared home the displays of mourning intensified. Each city seemed to compete with the one before to show Kane’s memory even greater honors. On Monday morning, citizens of Columbus took the remains to the station and placed on a train heading east. At various points along the train’s path through Ohio “the people assembled in great numbers, and stood uncovered while the train was passing, whilst at some points the station-houses and dwellings by the side of the road were draped in mourning, indicative of the deep and wide-spread feeling of admiration that prevailed for the character and services of the deceased, and the heartfelt sorrow for his early demise.”⁴⁸

After crossing the Ohio River again near Wheeling, amidst the tolling bells of boats on the river, the body was placed upon a specially prepared car of the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad to be taken to Baltimore.⁴⁹ Citizens of Wheeling, who had planned to have Kane’s body over the Sunday Sabbath, were disappointed by not being able to express more fully their sorrow.⁵⁰

Baltimore had special reason to mourn the death of Dr. Kane, for it was the site of the Maryland Institute of which Kane was a member. Baltimore was the first stop along the route of this massive funeral procession where many of the participants in the ceremonies had known Kane personally. Many others had seen him lecture at the Institute a few years before. Following observances in Baltimore, a paper observed, “On no occasion have our citizens united more generally, or with a greater earnestness of purpose, in manifesting their appreciation of distinguished worth and eminent services.”⁵¹ Another

⁴⁷Ibid.

⁴⁸Elder, *Biography*, 340.

⁴⁹*Baltimore American*, March 11, 1857; Elder, 340.

⁵⁰Elder, *Biography*, 341.

⁵¹*Baltimore American*, March 11, 1857.

observed, "The testimonial was one of a universal character, it having been participated in by every class of our community."⁵² As the body was carried from the train station to the Maryland Institute, where it was to lay in state, "the streets were walled with people, whilst windows, balconies and roof tops were occupied by spectators."⁵³ The funeral procession through the crowded streets included carefully arranged representatives from military, scientific, academic, fraternal and religious organizations. When the procession reached the Maryland Institute, ceremonies were performed and a band played a dirge before a crowd so large it had to be restrained by police.⁵⁴ The body lay in state overnight before being placed on a train for Philadelphia.

The morning of March 12 in Philadelphia was clear and cold. The normal activities of this busy city did not begin this morning; instead the whole city had an aura of mourning. "The indications of sorrow were seen on all sides.... The flags of the shipping were at half-mast, ...the public offices were closed, the bells were tolled, minute guns were discharged, and although the day was bright and clear, an anxious and solemn aspect characterized the city, and indicated the feelings of the community at large."⁵⁵ Homes and businesses draped signs of mourning from their windows. A building on Chestnut Street displayed a flag from its upper story which read "Philadelphia mourns an illustrious son, and the world a martyr to science and humanity."⁵⁶ A banner on another building declared "Science Weeps, Humanity Weeps, the World Weeps."⁵⁷

Hundreds of Philadelphians congregated outside Independence Hall, the birthplace of the nation, where the body of Elisha Kane lay. Here the symbolism of the mourned explorer could mingle with the symbolism of nationhood. "At an early hour the streets were filled with people, and the city presented the aspect of an unusual occasion. Before

⁵²*The Sun*, (Baltimore), March 11, 1857.

⁵³*Baltimore American*, March 11, 1857.

⁵⁴*The Sun*, (Baltimore), March 11, 1857.

⁵⁵*The Pennsylvania Inquirer*, March 13, 1857.

⁵⁶*Ibid.*

⁵⁷*Ibid.*

nine o'clock the vicinity of Independence Hall presented a dense mass of citizens, and there was continual accumulation until, about 10 o'clock, the crowd was almost impenetrable."⁵⁸ At 11 o'clock preparations began to form the line of procession. The city's newspapers listed the participants in great detail and appropriate order. They included Kane's shipmates from his Arctic expedition, political associations, clergy, members of scientific societies, fraternal organizations, military units and professional groups. The pall-bearers were among Philadelphia and the nation's elite, including the governor, prominent jurists, and an Episcopal bishop.⁵⁹

At 12 o'clock the body was brought out of Independence Hall as the State House bell tolled, and the procession proceeded toward the Second Presbyterian Church. It moved slowly, taking nearly an hour to pass a single point.⁶⁰ At the church only those with invitations could fit inside to hear the eulogy delivered by Reverend Charles Shields. Still it was reported that nine hundred fifty people were crowded into the lower floor and galleries.⁶¹ Most had to wait until the evening or next day to read the text of Shields' sermon in its entirety on the front pages of the city newspapers. After this ceremony, the body of Elisha Kent Kane finally ended its journey and was lain to rest in Laurel Hill cemetery.

* * *

In death Kane achieved his goals of nationwide fame and admiration. Coming as it did little more than a year after his return from the Arctic, and only months after the publication of his thrilling narrative, his death came at the apex of his career. More than any book review, the public expression of mourning exemplified the way Kane's career as

⁵⁸*The Philadelphia Evening Journal*, March 12, 1857.

⁵⁹*The Public Ledger* (Philadelphia), March 13, 1857.

⁶⁰*The Pennsylvania Inquirer*, March 13, 1857; *The New York Herald*, March 13, 1857.

⁶¹*Evening Journal* (Philadelphia), March 12, 1857.

a celebrated explorer touched not only the minds, but also the hearts, of the American public.

Because antebellum Americans had a great curiosity about the unknown, and a belief that uncovering the unknown led to human progress and human happiness, a figure like Kane took on greater importance than might otherwise have been the case. The search for scientific knowledge in remote zones could easily be presented as a noble quest. Kane did not work in a laboratory doing experiments incomprehensible to the lay person, rather he voyaged out into unknown portions of the globe and exposed himself to physical peril in order to advance knowledge. Exploration combined intellectual achievement with physical courage and could be easily understood by a wide-ranging audience. Science could be read as adventure and adventure could be read as science, the scientific motives serving to legitimate a certain degree of fool-hardy adventure-seeking. As one observer pointed out about Kane. "His earliest travel and exploits have a color of scientific enthusiasm to sanction their physical hardihood."⁶²

Despite the prevalent use of stock phrases like "martyr to science" or "hero to science and humanity" or "science weeps," the evidence shows that Kane's actual scientific attainments were slight. In the eyes of his contemporaries, his greatest achievement was his shipmates' discovery of an "Open Polar Sea" in the far North. This was, of course, a mistake, though at the time of his death this was not yet known.⁶³ His other scientific achievements consisted of ethnographic descriptions of the Inuit, data on tides, astronomical observations, and observations on the natural history of the Arctic, all interesting but hardly monumental. Kane's real fame lay not in his scientific achievement, but in the values that his science seemed to promote. A broad spectrum of Americans loved

⁶²Review of *Elisha Kent Kane; A Biography* by William Elder, in *The Press*, January 14, 1858.

⁶³Corner, *Doctor Kane*, 167; Jeannette Mirsky, *Elisha Kent Kane and the Seafaring Frontier*, (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1954), 145-146.

Elisha Kent Kane not for his science alone, but rather, as one observer noted, for “the whole cluster of manly graces and virtues wedded to science.”⁶⁴

Science, especially geographical exploration, provided an opportunity for antebellum Americans to express their ideals of virtue and manhood. The *New York Daily Tribune* declared, “Whatever the scientific results of his perilous voyages, they are of still higher significance in the example they have presented of noble, persistent, and disinterested and undismayed manhood.”⁶⁵ As a polar explorer Kane exemplified admirable traits such as bravery, perseverance, selflessness, intelligence and duty. He placed the good of his men and the good of humanity through science above his own self-interest. Even those who did not understand Kane’s scientific significance could understand and honor his virtue in a seemingly humanitarian cause.

One Philadelphia newspaper trying to explain the honors being paid to Kane on the day of his funeral looked not to Kane’s practical discoveries, but to his symbolic value for the nation. This article suggested that Kane was being honored more for his motives than for his achievement. He was to be honored for “what he has attempted and endured in the high and ennobling service of science and philanthropy.”⁶⁶ The article concluded by saying that the ceremonies in honor of Kane were really about “that abstract ideal of manly virtue and magnanimity, which his life embodied.” His life was to serve as a moral inspiration and example to the young.⁶⁷ It was this aspect of Kane that brought his reputation out of the confines of the strictly scientific community, made him an accessible hero for a wider public, and turned his funeral into a national public ritual.

Kane’s funeral began as an opportunity to honor one man, yet it soon developed into a nation-wide celebration of the values he was said to represent. Thousands of Americans in New Orleans, Columbus, Louisville, Baltimore, Philadelphia, and other

⁶⁴*The Sun* (Philadelphia), March 13, 1857.

⁶⁵*The New York Daily Tribune*, February 18, 1857.

⁶⁶*Evening Journal* (Philadelphia), March 12, 1857.

⁶⁷*Ibid.*

cities, who knew neither one another nor Kane, all could imagine themselves as part of the same nation, despite the growing sectional conflict of the era.⁶⁸ The mayor of Cincinnati put it this way: “[Kane] was our countryman, and his life has made a bright page for our country’s history, and added to the consideration which the world abroad is daily disposed to concede to us as a nation.”⁶⁹ Eight members of the Louisville Bar expressed the same theme in a public letter of condolence to Judge Kane. “You must know that the reputation of your son belongs to the American public, and will be cherished as a part of the nation’s wealth. His heroic devotion to humanity and science has conferred imperishable glory upon his country.”⁷⁰ Kane was also often compared with the national icon, Columbus, the explorer who over 350 years earlier had sailed to the New World, and had come to be a symbol of the United States.

Harper’s Weekly printed a poem on its first page after Kane was buried, one stanza of which treats Kane, the scientific traveler, as a unifier of the nation. In the poem, all the regions of the country, from “Maine’s deep woods” to “Hot Southern lips” to “The large-lunged West” proclaim “Honor to Kane!” Interestingly, this poem appeared right next to, and in stark contrast with, a story on continuing conflict in “Bleeding Kansas”, the site of intense sectional conflict.⁷¹

Newspapers emphasized that Kane was a national American hero, not the hero of a particular class, region, or faction.⁷² Some stressed the journey of the corpse through both Southern and Northern states.⁷³ *The Baltimore Sun* observed that the mourning for Kane in Baltimore “was of universal character, it having been participated in by every class of

⁶⁸ On the nation as an “imagined community,” see Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Community: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, (New York: Verso, 1983).

⁶⁹*Cincinnati Daily Enquirer*, February 23, 1857.

⁷⁰*Louisville Courier*, March 4, 1857.

⁷¹*Harper’s Weekly*, March 14, 1857.

⁷²*The Boston Pilot*, July 18, 1857; *Louisville Courier*, March 4, 1857.

⁷³*The Philadelphia Inquirer*, March 13, 1857.

our community.”⁷⁴ Others pointed to the symbolic value of Kane lying in state in Independence Hall where the nation had been born. Reverend Charles Shields observed, “Fittingly we have suffered his honored remains to repose a few pensive hours at the shrine where patriotism gathers its fairest memories and choicest honors.”⁷⁵ Shields went on to use the image of geographic lines of latitude converging at the North Pole as a symbol for Kane’s role as a unifier of disparate people. To Shields, Kane’s journey to look for Franklin was “a beautiful tribute to the sentiment of national amity.”⁷⁶ Similarly the Mayor of Cincinnati observed that the citizens of his city came together “to pay respect to the remains, not of a party leader, nor of him who lost his life in party strife or in the broils of faction, but of one whose fame is world-wide, gained by distinguished services rendered to the intelligence and the humanity of the age.”⁷⁷ The intellectual and moral progress of the nation through science, as symbolized by Kane’s image, transcended the corrupting influences of faction and section at a time when little else did.

⁷⁴*The Baltimore Sun*, March 11, 1857.

⁷⁵Charles Shields, “Funeral Discourse,” in Elder, 371.

⁷⁶*ibid.*, 373.

⁷⁷Mayor Faran, quoted in *Cincinnati Daily Enquirer*, February 27, 1857.

CHAPTER TEN

PRIVATE LIVES AND A PUBLIC LEGACY

More than eight years after the heartfelt public funeral of Elisha Kane, a little volume appeared in American book shops called *The Love-Life of Dr. Kane*. It claimed to contain the private correspondence between the beloved Arctic navigator and the love of his life, Margaretta Fox. It told of a romance and a secret marriage between them, and it claimed a place for Maggie Fox in the nation's memory of Elisha Kane. The story of how this book came to be shows that the public's desire to satisfy its own curiosity had moved well beyond the ideals of virtue, progress, and egalitarian education, into a realm of sensation and celebrity more characteristic of a later phase of American popular culture. It also gave an otherwise powerless Maggie Fox some limited control over her situation. Maggie Fox, from Kane's death in 1857 to her own in 1893, made various attempts to use public curiosity to her own advantage while retaining some modicum of self-respect. In this she met with only limited success.¹

* * *

With the death of Kane, Margaret Fox was left in an ambiguous position. She had played no part in the grand national mourning for Kane's death. She could not play the part of the widow, since her secret marriage to Kane, if it had indeed taken place, was known only to a few. Rather, upon hearing of Kane's death, Fox fell seriously ill and remained ill for months. According to Elizabeth Ellet, "during the greater part of the time she was shut up in a dark room, utterly inconsolable, and unable to bear the light of day."²

¹ *The Love-Life of Dr. Kane*, (New York: George Carleton, 1865).

² *The Love-Life of Dr. Kane*, 280.

Had the romance between Elisha Kane and Maggie Fox truly been the sentimental novel it so much resembled, Fox would have withered away and died right then, but instead she was destined to live on for another thirty-five years. For most of this time she would be torn between conflicting influences, which continually mixed private with public concerns. Her every significant action was noted by strangers and reported upon in the newspapers. Rumors still circulated about the alleged affair between Fox and Elisha Kane. Even though Kane's official biographer, William Elder, made no mention of the spirit-rapper, two other biographical treatments of Kane, from around the same time, show that rumors had not disappeared. When William Godfrey wrote his account of the Second Grinnell Expedition to try to clear his name after the criticism he had received in *Arctic Explorations*, his publisher included a short biographical sketch of Kane at the end. This account, published near the end of 1857, described the relationship as a passionate love-affair, but lamented that Kane had succumbed to the aristocratic prejudices of his family and broken off the engagement. "The name of 'spirit-rapper,' with the pointings and gazings of the mob, the sneers of the ribald newspaper press, and the imputations of charlatanry," wrote the author of this sketch, "seemed dreadful to the man who had fearlessly confronted the weapons of both savage and civilized foes." This version of the story ended with Kane's cowardly renunciation of Fox.³ Samuel Schmucker's biography of Kane, which appeared sometime in 1858, also recalled the romance, but Schmucker wrote that Kane broke off the engagement before his death.⁴ These accounts undoubtedly reflected prevailing rumors that Kane and Fox had indeed been engaged, but had never been married.

³William C. Godfrey, *Godfrey's Narrative of the Last Grinnell Arctic Exploring Expedition, in Search of Sir John Franklin, 1853-4-5*, (Philadelphia: J.T. Lloyd & Co., 1857), 250-254. Most likely the biographical sketch was ghost-written by Godfrey's publisher. It is not in the same style as the narrative of the expedition.

⁴Samuel M. Schmucker, *The Life of Dr. Elisha Kent Kane, and of Other Distinguished American Explorers*, (Philadelphia: John E. Potter & Co., 1858), 73-75.

Conflicting forces vied for control of Margaret Fox in the years after Kane's death. On one side was her family and the public lifestyle of a spirit-rapper. On the other side was the memory of Elisha Kane and the ideology of middle-class propriety he had tried to instill in her. Kane had filled Fox with notions of morality which emphasized a private rather than public life for a virtuous woman and precluded any involvement in spirit-rapping. He had done everything he could do to separate Fox from the influences of her family and spiritualist circles. To live up to his expectations, she had promised Kane never to go back to spiritualism, and she would keep that promise, for a time.

Kane's influence, however, had left Maggie Fox in a predicament. He had pressured her to separate herself from everything she knew, but had offered nothing to fill the place except his own promises of eventual marriage. Now Kane was dead, and his family did not recognize her as his widow. The Kanes knew nothing of the secret marriage, since Elisha had continually lied to them about his relationship with Maggie Fox. Despite this, Fox at first looked to the Kane family for her future life. She hoped to gain from them the opportunity for a respectable private life, away from the public gaze of strangers.

Before leaving for England toward the end of his life, Kane had made a will. In it he set aside five thousand dollars to be held in a private trust by his brother, Robert Patterson Kane, for the benefit of Margaret Fox.⁵ Not long after Kane's death, Fox became aware of this through Henry Grinnell's wife who had witnessed the will. Sometime in March or April, 1857, Mrs. Fox wrote to Robert Kane: "My dear sir, a few days after the Dr.'s death, Mrs. Grinnell called to tell Margaret that she had been 'remembered to the last,' and that he had made a request which was left with you to deliver to Margaret. Her trials have been (as you must already know) greater than she could bear,

⁵"Elisha Kent Kane Will," [copy] in EKK Papers. Fox is not named in the will, rather the money was left in the keeping of Robert Kane for an unspecified private purpose, but Robert Kane never denied the claim that it was meant for Fox.

and we fear that unless changes soon take place she cannot survive them much longer. I wish you would come at once.... I send this note unknown to my daughter, still your presence cannot be unexpected.”⁶

On June 1, having recovered somewhat from her illness, Maggie Fox also wrote to Robert Kane. Clearly she was looking for emotional as well as financial support. She saw Dr. Kane’s brother as her link to her lost love and the only means to continue on the path toward respectability that Dr. Kane had urged her to take. “I know the Doctor must have left some message for me, and I know that you will not refuse to deliver it, even though it gives you much pain in recalling the name of him whose memory is and ever will be sacred.” She continued, expressing her mourning in the sentimental language of the day. “I have always held a religious faith in the deep sincerity of the Doctor’s love, and his memory will always remain a beautiful green in my unchanged affections.”⁷ Robert Kane was the only member of that family whom she knew at all. She saw him as someone she could go to in her grief, so she repeatedly appealed to him to visit her.⁸

Robert Kane, at first, wanted nothing to do with Maggie Fox. He knew that his brother had been involved with the notorious spirit-rapper, but it is doubtful that he knew anything of the secret marriage or even believed the rumors of a serious engagement between the two. All he knew was that his older brother had recklessly formed a secret relationship with Maggie Fox against his family’s wishes and despite the threat of public scandal. To him she was a dark shadow that threatened to obscure the bright reputation that his brother held in death. Above all else, he wanted her to go away.

Unfortunately for Robert Kane, his brother’s celebrity had given Maggie Fox some control of her situation. She had a large bundle of letters which showed that a romantic relationship had existed between her and the Doctor. In at least one of these letters, Elisha

⁶Mrs. Margaret Fox to Robert Patterson Kane, EKK Papers.

⁷Margaret Fox to Robert Patterson Kane, June 1, 1857, EKK Papers; The letter also appears in *Love-Life*, 283.

⁸For example, Margaret Fox to Robert Patterson Kane, n.d., EKK Papers; Margaret Fox to Robert Patterson Kane, June 1858, EKK Papers.

Kane referred to Maggie Fox as his wife. In almost all of them, Kane presented himself as an ardent lover. Moreover, the letters show Kane's fear of public exposure. Even if Maggie Fox could not, others reading the letters would be able to see that Kane's behavior had at times been cowardly, elitist, and less than gentlemanly, more concerned with his public reputation than with the woman he claimed to love.

Fox, however, was not out to ruin Elisha Kane's reputation. She wanted recognition from the Kane family and help avoiding public sensationalism. Her first job, then, was to prove to Robert Kane that his brother had loved her and planned to marry her. She needed to demonstrate that it had been no tawdry sexual affair that needed to be hushed up, so she showed Robert Kane some of the letters his brother had written to her. These made clear to him that Elisha had repeatedly promised to marry Fox. At first Fox shied away from any mention of the secret marriage that would later be described in the *Love-Life*. She may have mentioned it, but at this point she did not assert that it was a legal marriage that would give her the rights of a widow. She continued to call herself Margaret Fox rather than Mrs. Kane, as she would later be known.⁹

Though Fox's motive seems primarily to have been recognition, she also needed money. She did not want to be a burden on her mother and Kate, with whom she was then living. Kate Fox was still an active medium, so it was her money which paid for everything. Maggie Fox could not live as a dependent on her sister for long without being drawn back into spiritualism herself. She wanted to retire from public life, to live the virtuous life that Dr. Kane had urged her toward. To succeed, she needed the help that Robert Kane was in the position to give. This was not unreasonable, especially since Elisha Kane's estate had grown significantly since he had written his will. When he wrote it, five-thousand dollars may have been all he could afford to leave Fox, but *Arctic Explorations* was bringing in many thousands of dollars to his estate. In August, just six

⁹Margaret Fox to Robert Patterson Kane, June 1, 1857, EKK Papers; *Love-Life*, 283.

months after Kane died, one newspaper reported that Kane's share of the profits of his book had reached \$60,000.¹⁰

Out of necessity, Robert Kane began to cultivate a relationship with Fox. He tried to protect her from what he thought of as evil spiritualist influences, and he provided her with small sums of money to help pay her bills. Yet, as months passed, it gradually became clear that Robert Kane's motives were not solely altruistic, and he did not appear willing to use the entire five-thousand dollars left with him for Fox's support. Fox was an annoyance and a threat, who held the power to expose his brother's private life to a curious public. He wanted to gain control of the letters, even though she assured him that they would never leave her hands. "The letters are mine to guard and cherish so long as I live," she sentimentally told him, "and when I am no longer able to guard them, I will place them with you, but do not think me so lost as to ever allow them to be published."¹¹ To make sure that this really would be the case, Robert Kane needed to continue to cultivate good relations with Maggie Fox. He did not trust her with the letters, and wished to get them out of her hands as soon as possible.

Kane, rightly, feared the influences of others on Maggie Fox, especially Elizabeth Fries Ellet, who had become friends with the Fox family. Ellet was well-known in antebellum America, and she is remembered today as the first major historian of American women. In 1848, the same year the Fox sisters first began their knockings, Ellet wrote the path-breaking *Women of the American Revolution*, which recounted the role women played in the early history of the United States. She was the author of a number of other books, and her shorter writings often appeared in popular magazines such as *Godey's Ladies Book* and *Grahams Magazine*. By all indication Ellet had a formidable personality. She was making a way for herself, not only as a sentimental author, but as a serious

¹⁰*The National Era* (Washington, D.C.), August 6, 1857.

¹¹Margaret Fox to Robert Patterson Kane, May 27, 1858, EKK Papers.

historian, in an area of life dominated by men. She skillfully used the means available to her to get as far as she could both professionally and personally.¹²

It is not clear when Ellet and Fox came to know one another, but she first appears in Fox's correspondence in July 1858. Ellet soon learned of Maggie Fox's position, and she came to the conclusion that Fox was not getting what she deserved from the Kanes. When she learned of the secret marriage between Fox and Dr. Kane, she concluded that it was a legally binding union under the Common Law and laws of New York State, which should have given Fox the rights of a widow. Ellet began to pressure Fox to stop deferring to Robert Kane when he treated her with a lack of proper recognition, and instead to fight for what she deserved. Fox was clearly torn. Robert Kane was helping her a little, but not as much as she wished. If she made waves, even that little bit of support might disappear. Besides, the last thing she wanted, at this point, was publicity.

Meanwhile, Robert Kane thought he had the matter in hand. He claimed to take a genuine interest in Fox's welfare, and Fox seemed to be deferring to his wishes when it came to the letters.¹³ On August 11, when Kane was about to depart on a trip to the South, he sent her his good wishes and fifty dollars, but while he was gone, Ellet's pressure seems to have influenced Maggie Fox's thinking. Two and a half weeks later, he returned to his home in Philadelphia and found a letter waiting for him on his table. It must have come as something of a dreadful surprise when he opened and began to read this letter from a New York lawyer named Rush C. Hawkins.

Dear Sir:

I have been requested by a gentleman of this city to communicate with you in regard to the wife of your deceased brother, Elisha K. Kane.

I am of the opinion that Margaretta Fox was on the [blank] day of Oct. 1856 lawfully married to your brother, and that she is now justly entitled to bear his name: It seems that there has been some doubt existing in the minds of the friends and relatives of your brother, in relation to this marriage: of the marriage above referred to there exists abundant proof.

¹²Scott E. Casper, *Constructing American Lives: Biography and Culture in Nineteenth-Century America*, (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1999), 135-178.

¹³Robert Patterson Kane to Margaret Fox, July 4, 1858, EKK Papers.

Hawkins went on to express an interest in seeing Kane's will on behalf of "Mrs. Kane", because, he said, he had reason to believe "her husband" had provided for her in it. He closed by saying that he was acting, "not as a lawyer, but as a friend, on behalf of a woman ignorant of her rights and the laws of her country." The implication was that there was still time to settle the matter in an informal and quiet manner, but that, if necessary, legal recourse would be taken, which would naturally attract publicity.¹⁴

Robert P. Kane must have been mortified to hear Maggie Fox referred to as "Mrs. Kane" and Elisha referred to as "her husband." Here was a notorious rapper claiming membership within his own family. He could stomach giving Fox small sums of money as a charity case, but he certainly did not want to acknowledge her as a relative. Kane reacted to Hawkins' letter by immediately trying to regain control over Maggie Fox.

He met with her and "explained to her at some length how ill-judged had been the action of her so called friends."¹⁵ Propriety dictated that Fox be humble and to place herself in the hands of her superiors, who knew what was best. To a surprising degree, Fox was convinced by this argument. She craved what she saw as a normal life. She wanted to be well thought of by genteel people. Most of all, she did not want to be the object of further public scrutiny.

Kane solicited the help of other respectable personages in his cause, and the cause, he claimed to believe, of Margaret Fox. Horace Greeley had remained on friendly terms with the Fox family ever since they had first traveled to New York City in 1850. He was not a believer in spiritualism, but he still thought the Fox sisters might have unique mesmeric or clairvoyant powers. Greeley took an interest in their welfare, paying for an education for Kate, for instance, and inviting the Fox family to stay at his house in New York at various times. Greeley advised Margaret that she was better off appealing to Robert Kane's good will as a gentleman, than demanding what was hers through the law or

¹⁴Rush C. Hawkins to Robert Patterson Kane, August 20, 1858, EKK Papers.

¹⁵Robert Patterson Kane to William Quinn, August 30, 1858, EKK Papers.

attracting publicity to herself. Despite being a newspaper man, Greeley thought that private matters should remain out of the public eye. At the same time Greeley may have thought that Robert Kane should provide for Fox better than he was doing.¹⁶

Fox was also getting advice from Father William Quinn, a Roman Catholic priest. When Dr. Kane was still alive he had told Fox of his admiration for the Roman Catholic faith, and he had urged her to consider membership in it.¹⁷ On August 15, 1858, in a ceremony attended by her mother, father, sister Kate, and Horace Greeley, Margaret was baptized as a Roman Catholic at St. Peter's Church in New York.¹⁸ This was disapproved of by her Methodist family, but they went along with Maggie's wishes. Given the extreme anti-authoritarian position of most spiritualists, the top-down structure of Catholicism was about as far as one could get from spirit-rapping. Becoming a Roman Catholic was thus Maggie Fox's way of turning her back on spiritualism in favor of tradition and paternalistic authority. She did not, however, publicly repudiate the rapping. That would have been too much of a blow to her family members who were still involved in it. She preferred to simply separate herself from the rapping and conform to the teachings of the Roman Catholic faith. Of course, this did not prevent the papers from disagreeing about the significance of her conversion. The *Herald* saw it as a recantation of spiritualism, while Greeley's *Tribune* disagreed, saying that Fox had "never dreamed of saying or implying that any of her family were guilty of fraud or deception in the matter of the 'Rappings.'"¹⁹

Fox's conversion was a blessing for Robert Kane, since Father Quinn, Fox's new spiritual mentor, would be a great help to him in his efforts to keep Fox away from the

¹⁶Robert Patterson Kane to William Quinn, August 30, 1858, EKK Papers; Horace Greeley to Robert Patterson Kane, September 21, 1858, EKK Papers.

¹⁷*Love-Life*, 284-285.

¹⁸*The Evening Post* (New York), August 16, 1858; *The New York Daily Tribune*, August 17, 1858; *The Public Ledger* (Philadelphia), August 16, 1858; Fox's baptism was reported on as far away as South Carolina, indicating how much she was still of public interest. *The Charleston Mercury*, August 20, 1858.

¹⁹*New York Herald*, August 16, 1858; *New York Daily Tribune*, August 17, 1858.

influences of spiritualists and her family. Kane worried less about a legal suit claiming a portion of Elisha's estate than he did about publicity. His greatest fear was that Elisha's letters to Maggie Fox might be published. Once again this was an effort being driven chiefly by Elizabeth Ellet. At some point in the summer or fall of 1858, Kane received a letter from a friend of the family touching upon this delicate matter. Through it, Kane was made aware of what was going on within enemy lines. "I've something to tell you that is none of my business," wrote the friend. "It relates to Dr. Kane's correspondence with Miss Fox, which is about to be published. That is, it is in the hands of Mrs. Ellet (of magazine celebrity) to whom publishers have made large offers for the publication." The writer went on to say that Fox had not yet given her consent, chiefly because of the influence of Ellen Walter, who disapproved of the idea, but that Maggie's sister and mother favored publication. "Her family are urging her strongly, and Mrs. Ellet tells her it is due to her own reputation which the [Kane] family have injured etc., and altogether they are endeavoring to make her feel that she is deeply aggrieved by the family in various ways, and that it is only justice to herself and family that these letters should be published." This writer seems to have been witness to a conversation between Ellet and members of the Fox family, who were unaware of the listener's connection with the Kanes. This writer then went on to indicate that publication could probably be prevented with some action on the part of the Kanes.²⁰

Word was reaching Robert Kane from a variety of fronts concerning Ellet's interest in and influence over Maggie Fox. Cornelius Grinnell returned to his home in New York in early October, after a cruise in his yacht, to discover that Ellet had been talking with his mother, who had witnessed Elisha Kane's will. Grinnell had the chance to speak with Ellet and promptly reported to Robert Kane that "the drift of her plans... are to make out that Miss Fox was married to the Doctor from the fact (as she states) that he had several times before witnesses addressed her as his wife." Grinnell clearly thought Ellet's case had no

²⁰"letter in re publication of Kane-Fox correspondence," EKK Papers.

merit. "The idea was so absurd that I may have received it rather too jocosely for Mrs. Ellet's ire was aroused. I regret extremely the turn this affair has taken, and I await your arrival with some impatience."²¹

For her part, Maggie Fox was growing angry with the attempts on both sides to control her and the letters. She did not want to go public, but she did need support. In early September, she wrote to Robert Kane, telling him that the letters were safe from publication, yet she also refused to hand them over to him. "The letters are sacred to me, little as you have appreciated it." Only when she died, she told him, would they pass to the Kane family. She also reassured him that, despite Ellet's urgings, she did not claim the status of Elisha Kane's widow. "The private marriage you can think of as you please. My ideas of a private marriage are very different from Mrs. Ellet's. To me a private marriage is quite as disgraceful, as to stand in another light, but our honorable engagement you can never deny, at least to me."²² Fox was trying to do what she thought was respectable, but without getting any real support from Robert Kane, the costs were high. As it so often was for Margaret Fox, the respectable course was the least profitable.

For a time, Kane seemed to have won Fox over. The book was put on hold and Kane heard no more word of legal recourse by Fox. He supplied enough money to Fox to allow her to live a modest existence, and she, in turn, behaved with a meekness which pleased him. Soon she was even contemplating entering a convent to live out her life in pious and secluded surroundings.²³ But Maggie Fox was far from happy. Elisha Kane's death seems to have triggered problems with depression and alcoholism. By early 1859, she rented her own room in New York, so that she did not have to live with her sister and mother, in constant association with spiritualists, but this isolation hurt more than it helped. Soon, her family and friends became aware that she was drinking heavily.²⁴

²¹Cornelius Grinnell to Robert Patterson Kane, October 5, 1858, EKK Papers.

²²Margaret Fox to Robert Patterson Kane, September 2, 1858, EKK Papers.

²³Margaret Fox to Robert Patterson Kane, November, 1858, EKK Papers

²⁴Mariam Pond, *Time is Kind: The Story of the Unfortunate Fox Family*,

All of her money now came from Robert Kane, in whose hands she seemed to place her fate. Early in 1859, she began to negotiate with Robert Kane and Father Quinn about depositing all of the letters with Quinn at the church. In return, she would get a steady allowance from Robert Kane, sufficient to allow her to live a modest life, while Father Quinn would act as her chief advisor and as a mediator between Fox and Kane.²⁵ Yet Fox was reluctant to release her hold on the letters, and they did not yet settle upon an arrangement.

By the end of 1859, she was still behaving properly, in the opinion of Father Quinn. She held on to the letters, but received an allowance from Kane which assured they would be kept private. Quinn wrote to Kane in December. "I must say that she conducts herself very well. She attends church very regularly, confession also; and the other obligations of our church are not neglected. I am sure these observances will keep her from all improper influences." But Quinn still worried about those "improper influences." "Still you know mother, Kate and many others of the same sort, who have little judgment, are constantly with her and urging her to contract obligations beyond her means." But Quinn assured Kane that he would work to keep Fox under his benevolent control. "I will advise her and obtain a promise that she will consult with me on all matters of even moderate importance."²⁶

One of Quinn's worries, which he passed on to Kane, was the continued influence of Elizabeth Ellet. "That woman Ellet," Quinn wrote, "fills her mind with nonsense in the hope that she may be able to make a book and get the lion's share." He suggested that, if Kane raised Fox's allowance, he might be able to get her finally to place the letters in his safe keeping.²⁷ These same concerns continued to plague Kane and Quinn through the

(New York: Centennial Press, 1947), 217-229. John Fox, Maggie and Kate's father, had a drinking problem and Kate too would abuse alcohol.

²⁵William Quinn to Robert Patterson Kane, January 20, 1859, EKK Papers; William Quinn to Robert Patterson Kane, March 16, 1859, EKK Papers; William Quinn to Robert Patterson Kane, March 12, 1860, EKK Papers.

²⁶William Quinn to Robert Patterson Kane, December 12, 1859, EKK Papers.

²⁷William Quinn to Robert Patterson Kane, March 12, 1860, EKK Papers.

following year. Fox was unhappy, and she was drinking heavily. Many of her letters to Kane from this time deteriorate into an incoherent scrawl. By the Autumn of 1860, Quinn was still telling Kane that he feared "the influence of a certain class of book makers who are less or more acquainted with her."²⁸

Over the course of the next year, Robert Kane's control slowly began to unravel. Ellet was still at work trying to find out what people like the Grinnells knew, and she was urging Fox to see a lawyer. At the same time, Fox was telling Robert Kane that she thought she was going insane. She was unhappy and constantly in need of money.²⁹ She was also isolated, due largely to the efforts of Quinn and Kane. The paternalistic control of Kane and Quinn brought her a meager and insecure income, but their efforts to remove her from "improper influences" served to isolate her from most sources of emotional support. She had set up her private rooms as a morbid shrine to Elisha Kane. On Sundays, Kate, who was also developing a drinking problem, would visit her in these rooms. According to Mariam Pond, who married a descendant of the Fox family, and wrote a semi-fictionalized history based, in part, on family tradition, Kate hesitated to tell her mother of what happened at these visits.

Kate could not find the words to tell their mother of the strangeness that was changing Maggie. She did not tell her of the black-curtained shrine Maggie had arranged in a large closet, where she mourned before the candle-lighted, flower-bedecked portrait of Elisha, sobbing hysterically in tearless grief, for tears had ceased to flow from Maggie's eyes. Nor could Kate speak of the more shameful fact, that after each exhausting outburst of emotion, Maggie would stumble blindly to the outer room and drink until sleep came with dreams which bore her far away. Her grief found other forms of violent expression; she played and sang in frenzied outbursts which brought protest and interference from her long-suffering neighbors.³⁰

Robert Kane and Father Quinn apparently considered such isolation as better than the "improper influences" of her family.

²⁸William Quinn to Robert Patterson Kane, October 14, 1860, EKK Papers.

²⁹Margaret Fox to Robert Patterson Kane, September 15, 1860, EKK Papers.

³⁰ Pond, *Time is Kind*, 217.

Robert Kane's influence over Maggie Fox, though, had always been tenuous, and in 1862, most likely because of financial pressures, she finally consented to publish Elisha's letters. Ellet made arrangements with a New York publisher, George W. Carleton, to publish the volume. Carleton apparently thought that Elisha Kane's celebrity was still great enough, five years after his death, to draw interest.³¹ Fox also hired a lawyer and brought suit against Kane in Orphan's Court in Philadelphia. Kane, no longer able to constrain Fox with a few dollars and an appeal to her sense of propriety, hired his own lawyers, and negotiations commenced to halt both the law suit and the book.³²

Robert Kane succeeded, but only by entering into an out-of-court settlement with Fox in which he agreed to pay her a specified allowance. In return, publication of the letters was stopped, and the letters were placed in the hands of a third party, Dr. Edward Bayard, who had tended to Fox's medical needs for many years. As long as Fox received the agreed upon payments from Kane, the letters would remain with Bayard. If the payments stopped, for any reason, Fox could retrieve her letters from Bayard.³³

This arrangement lasted another three years, until 1865, when, for some unknown reason, Kane discontinued the payments. In accordance with the terms of the agreement, Bayard returned the letters to Fox, and they were promptly published. *The Love Life of Dr. Kane* appeared anonymously. Ellet's name appears nowhere on it, but it is clear that it was she who edited the volume and wrote the introduction and the narrative which connected the letters.³⁴

³¹ On Carleton see Madeleine B Stern, "G. W. Carleton: His Mark," *Publisher's Weekly*, August 17, 1946.

³² *Love-Life*, vii-x.

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ *Ibid.*; Mariam Buckner Pond identifies a man named Joseph LaFumee as the author of the Preface and attributes the rest of the work to Maggie Fox alone with some help from LaFumee. She makes no mention of Elizabeth Ellet. Pond, *Time is Kind*, 219. Primary sources in the Elisha Kent Kane Papers, however, discussed earlier, clearly indicate Elizabeth Ellet's central role in the preparation of the volume.

Ellet first apologized “for presenting to the world that which was never intended to meet the public eye.”³⁵ She was well aware that public exposure of private matters, while growing in frequency, was still looked upon as unseemly. She addressed this issue in a preface. “Perhaps many will think that no circumstances could justify the publication of the letters contained in this volume,” but, she continued, Maggie Fox “has borne the sneers of the world, and the neglect of those whose regard for the deceased should have induced them to protect, comfort, and befriend her.”³⁶ She had been slandered in the press and humiliated by the Kane family, said Ellet, and she was finally denied the money left to her by Kane. To make matters worse, the papers were repeating the Kanes’ claim that Maggie Fox had never married Elisha Kane. “Could any woman who respected herself, submit to such an indignity?” asked Ellet. “What was there about her whom Dr. Kane had wooed and wedded, that she should be thus insulted, and denied common justice under an outrageous imputation? Her sole means of defense,” continued Ellet, “her only vindication - was the publication of this correspondence.”³⁷

Maggie Fox was a poor girl, who found herself being mistreated by the rich and powerful. Ellet asserted that the personal letters of Dr. Kane were being published as a last resort in defense of the defenseless. “The world usually sides with the rich, the proud, and the powerful; and it is not expected that the poor, the humble and the weak, will receive either justice or sympathy.”³⁸ Before the American public, however, the humble could attain justice. The private dispute between Margaret Fox and the Kane family was being presented to the public much as spirit-rapping had been. Let the public decide who was right and who was wrong.

Ellet’s task was to not only to justify publication of the letters, but also to construct a compelling narrative. Readers would not pick up *The Love-Life of Dr. Kane* just to

³⁵*Love-Life*, vii.

³⁶*Love-Life*, vii.

³⁷*Love-Life*, x.

³⁸*Love-Life*, x.

vindicate Maggie Fox. Ellet also had to claim that readers could gain insight into the character of Dr. Kane through reading his love-letters. Here, as in her more well known women's histories, Ellet combined scholarship with sentiment.³⁹ She claimed that great men could not be properly understood without a knowledge of the women they loved. As the title suggests, *The Love-Life of Dr. Kane* is more about Elisha Kane than it is about Maggie Fox, yet it claims a place for her at his side. Ellet explains, "The loves of eminent men, through the world's literary history, have not only shared their renown, but have aided them to deserve it."⁴⁰

The Love-Life was part of the sentimental literature of the day. Its task was to expose the heart of the man through his emotional life. By witnessing the character of his love for Maggie Fox, claimed Ellet, "we are all the more touched by his tenderness, and wonder at the depth and ardor of the love that impelled him." Ellet continued, linking the sentiment behind Kane's heroic Arctic travels with his feelings for Maggie Fox. "So the little incident of his carrying the portrait of his beloved one strapped to his back, through the dreary Arctic wastes, gives us a better insight into a true and noble heart than all the anecdotes collected by his biographer."⁴¹

The Love-Life of Dr. Kane is the classic story of a love which transcended social boundaries. Like Pamela and Mr. B. of Samuel Richardson's novel *Pamela*, or Jane Eyre and Rochester, of Charlotte Bronte's *Jane Eyre*, Kane and Fox were not evenly matched. Ellet played upon democratic sensibilities to present both Fox and Kane as lovers tormented by social prejudice which derived not only from class difference, but also from cultural difference. "That one so distinguished and highly esteemed as Dr. Kane should love and wed an untutored girl, with only beauty and virtue for her dower, was scarcely pardonable by a proud family: but the added odium of the spirit-rapping association his family could

³⁹ This aspect of Ellet's writing is discussed in Casper, *Constructing American Lives*, 159-178. Although Casper was not aware of Ellet's connection with *The Love-Life of Dr. Kane*.

⁴⁰ *Love-Life*, 14.

⁴¹ *Love-Life*, 16-17.

Figure 18

(BEFORE MARRIAGE)

Dear Mamma - I have been thinking of
our days together - live a life of purity
and goodness. Consecrate it to me,
I have no great gifts
which even the best of us could
be a blessing. I trust then, dear Mamma,
until God brings me back to you - and
then - meeting my eye with the proud
contentment of virtue - we will realize
ourselves to be partners sanctified by
love and marriage. Golden fields
shall spread before us their summer
harvest. Silver lakes mirror your
very breasts. Let us live for
each other - Farewell!

E. K. Kane

(AFTER MARRIAGE)

Dear Mamma - May I meet you at half
past ten to night. I have a Capital
trunk for your Mother. Do not say no
but I will send the latest news and
I'll be with you.

Facsimiles of Kane's letters offered as proof of his marriage to Fox.

not possibly bear; his friends shrank from it; he, himself, with all his bravery, trembled to encounter it.”⁴² The antagonists here are the Kane family, who, according to Ellet, impeded the course of Elisha’s true expression of love. She trusts that the democratic sensibilities of American public opinion will help right the wrongs of aristocratic prejudice.

Had *The Love-Life of Dr. Kane* appeared shortly after Kane’s death it would, no doubt, have caused a sensation. As it was, the little book received some notice but was hardly a best seller. When the *New York Times* reviewed the publication, it commented that, despite the excuses made in the preface, the volume should not have been published. They regarded it as “an intrusion of private matters before that many-headed monster, the Public - the last body in the world that should be selected to exercise the functions of a court of appeal for the redress of individual grievances.”⁴³ Nor did the Kane family back down. They denounced *The Love-Life* as a “canard.”⁴⁴ Unfortunately we have no publication records to tell us how many people read the little volume, but we do know that, in at least one sense, publication was a success. For the remainder of her life, Margaret Fox was known as Mrs. Kane. She had gained some of the recognition she desired, but she needed to find a stable income now that she could no longer look to Robert Kane.

* * *

The ideals of genteel behavior which Elisha Kane had tried to instill in Margaret Fox did not work very well when she tried to put them into practice. She had become a public celebrity early in life, and sensational public activity seemed to be the only kind which now brought her any rewards. For the remainder of the 1860s, after the *Love-Life* appeared, Fox remained faithful to her decision to abandon rapping, but by 1871 the financial pressures became too strong, and she took up her old career again.⁴⁵

⁴²*Love-Life*, 17-18.

⁴³*The New York Times*, December 15, 1865.

⁴⁴*The New York Daily Tribune*, September 11, 1865.

⁴⁵Pond, *Time is Kind*, 242.

Even though she returned to the rappings, she never embraced theological Spiritualism as her sister Leah did. She continued to maintain the old investigative model they had begun years before. On the back of her cards she printed a notice: "Mrs. Kane does not claim any Spirit power: but people must judge for themselves."⁴⁶ She continued to present her customers with simple rappings, but, by this time, there were many other mediums, including her sister Kate, who could produce far more sensational phenomena, such as materializations, spirit-writing, and even spirit-photography, but Fox seems to have gotten by with simple raps and name recognition. Since she attracted little notice, there are few sources for her life at this time. Mariam Pond describes this phase in Maggie Fox's career, which lasted through the 1870s and much of the 1880s:

Maggie made a few tours to other cities and to other sections of the country, but there was little in her work which merited recording. She was remembered as a sad, almost morbid little woman, who had occasional periods of intemperance which interrupted her professional career. Neither her work nor her intemperance attracted much attention. Maggie had become unimportant to the general public.⁴⁷

Fox remained isolated, and her drinking may soon have been supplemented by other drug use.⁴⁸ The Fox family no longer remained together. Mrs. Fox had died in 1865, shortly before the *Love-Life* was published. Mr. Fox, too, was dead. Kate spent much of the 1870s and early 1880s in England, where she married an Englishman named Henry Jencken and had two children. Leah was still in New York City, but she and Maggie were becoming increasingly estranged from one another. Leah had given up professional rapping after marrying a wealthy man named Daniel Underhill, but she remained an advocate for theological Spiritualism. While Daniel Underhill sometimes contributed to Maggie's support, Maggie and Leah's relationship was not very good, and Maggie's drinking and distaste for her spirit-rapping career did little to help.⁴⁹

⁴⁶Reuben Briggs Davenport, *The Death-Blow to Spiritualism*, (New York: G. W. Dillingham, 1888), 236.

⁴⁷Pond, *Time is Kind*, 285.

⁴⁸*Ibid.*, 289.

⁴⁹Pond, *Time is Kind*, 232-279; Herbert Jackson, *The Spirit Rappers*; (New York: Doubleday, 1972), 183-211; The best evidence of Maggie Fox's

While Fox's activities went largely unnoticed, she did play a role in the University of Pennsylvania's Seybert Commission. A wealthy spiritualist named Henry Seybert, for whom Fox had sometimes rapped, left a legacy in his will funding scientific investigations of spiritualist phenomena. In 1887 Fox gave the Seybert Commission some demonstrations of the rappings. While the commission had exposed some other frauds, they were not able to expose Maggie Fox, but this was mainly because she simply refrained from rapping when the scrutiny was too close. They were unconvinced by her performance.⁵⁰

Fox's dissatisfaction and the problems within her family came to a climax in the late 1880s, with nation-wide repercussions for the spiritualist movement. Kate returned from England after her husband died, but she, like Maggie, had become strange and unpredictable. The two of them were by this time confirmed alcoholics and mentally unhinged. Kate quickly began to alienate herself other family members. Mariam Pond explains this as the result of Kate's overprotected and spoiled children. Leah and Kate soon had a falling out, caused, in part, by Kate's alcohol abuse. To make matters worse, Leah considered Kate an unfit mother, and she may have taken part in a highly publicized attempt by the *Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children* to remove Kate's children from her.⁵¹

Maggie Fox had left New York for England in late March 1888, so she was in London when she learned, through a story in the *New York Herald*, of Leah's conflict with Kate, and Kate's attempt to keep her children. Her response was to go public with her dissatisfaction in a scathing letter to the *Herald*. She blamed all of her family's and her own problems on spiritualism. "Spiritualism is a curse," Fox declared to the *Herald*. "No

hatred for her sister Leah is Davenport, *Death-Blow*, which contains repeated jabs against the oldest of the sisters.

⁵⁰*Preliminary Report of the Commission Appointed by the University of Pennsylvania to Investigate Modern Spiritualism in Accordance with the Request of the Late Henry Seybert*. Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott Company, 1887.

⁵¹Pond, *Time is Kind*, 287-290; Jackson, *Spirit Rappers*, 197-199.

matter in what form Spiritualism may be presented, it is, has been and always will be a curse and a snare to all who meddle with it." She complained of fanatics who gravitated toward the most sensational manifestations and who ignored simple rappings, which Fox still claimed were the "only part of the phenomena that is worthy of notice."⁵²

These were harsh words coming from one of the best-known names in spiritualism. Even if her career was in decline, she was still one of the famed Fox sisters. While Fox had not denounced Spiritualism as a total fraud, she had come close. Her words contrasted sharply with those of her sister Leah Underhill, who, just three years before, had written *The Missing-Link in Modern Spiritualism*, which told the history of the rappings from their beginnings in Hydesville (or at least her version of the history) and celebrated the movement as the dawning of a new age.⁵³ Reporters were thus ready for Maggie Fox when she returned to New York in September 1888. They were not disappointed. Fox told them that she planned to expose Spiritualism for the fraud it was.

A reporter from the *Herald* described the scene when he called on Maggie Fox in her home on West Forty-fourth Street in New York. He described her as a "small, magnetic woman of middle age, whose face bears the traces of much sorrow and of a world-wide experience." Her behavior was erratic. She paced the floor and periodically burst into tears in front of the reporter, as she told him of her plans to expose the whole fraud. At times she would sit down suddenly at the piano and "pour forth fitful floods of wild, incoherent melody."⁵⁴

Fox's plans came to fruition the following month in New York's Academy of Music. Responding to posters and advertisements which promised the death of Spiritualism, on October 21 an audience made up of "a mixed assemblage of many grades

⁵²*New York Herald*, May 27, 1888.

⁵³ A. Leah Underhill, *The Missing Link in Modern Spiritualism*, (New York: Thomas R. Knox, 1885).

⁵⁴*New York Herald* quoted in Davenport, *Death-Blow*, 32-33.

of society” came together to witness Fox’s renunciation.⁵⁵ It was an immense audience according to the *Tribune*.

One could easily pick out in the crowded seats professional men of all sorts - ministers, physicians and lawyers, scholarly men and women, men of repute in legitimate scientific research, others notorious in the walks of humbug, women well-known by the frequenters of materialization seances, and distinguished “cranks” who adorn every such occasion, and Sunday night idlers who came from the same motive from which Artimus Ward’s “Uncle Simon, he clum up a tree,” namely, to see what they could see.⁵⁶

In other words, Maggie Fox’s renunciation attracted the same sort of audience her performances always had. For her it must have been very much like the early days of spirit-rapping almost forty years before, except this time she was in the role of an anti-spiritualist like Chauncey Burr. Once again, Fox combined her own skills with those of an experienced male lecturer. Dr. Cassius M. Richmond, a dentist who was fond of exposing frauds, mounted the podium and delivered a lecture in which he asserted that the age of miracles was over. Telling his audience, “you are judge and jury,” he gave some demonstrations of slate writing and other tricks by which, he claimed, professional mediums made their living.⁵⁷

Soon it was Maggie Fox’s turn to take the stage. Kate was there too, but she only sat in the audience in silent affirmation of her sister’s action. Fox came out, “a little, compact woman, dark eyed and dark haired and dressed in black, and using eyeglasses with black cord and heavy black rims.” She was obviously frightened and appeared so pathetic that some in the audience began to heckle her. She read her statement that spiritualism was a fraud, then sat down and put her feet up on a board. Richmond, like Chauncey Burr and the Buffalo Doctors many years before, explained that the raps were made with the bones of the big toe. While the audience members in the gallery made “irreverent remarks” a committee of doctors examined her feet, and Fox rapped. Moving to

⁵⁵*The New York Times*, October 22, 1888.

⁵⁶*The New York Daily Tribune*, October 22, 1888.

⁵⁷*The New York Times*, October 22, 1888; *The New York Daily Tribune*, October 22, 1888.

various parts of the stage, Maggie made rapping sounds which could be heard clearly throughout the hall.⁵⁸

* * *

Maggie Fox's exposure of spiritualism was a shock to the Spiritualist movement, but one they could get over. Fox was mentally unbalanced and addicted to alcohol and perhaps other drugs. Spiritualists claimed that she had simply come under the control of evil men who wanted to exploit her name to embarrass spiritualists. Spirit-rapping was not the fraud, the renunciation was. Kate, too, was a pathetic remnant of her former self, so when they both signed their names to authenticate *Death-Blow to Spiritualism*, a little book exposing the whole history of spirit-rapping and published that same year, the truly dedicated spiritualists ignored it. Kate and Maggie also found limited success as anti-spiritualists, even though they toured the country for a time as exposers. As audiences for Chauncey Burr had discovered years before, it was more fun to wonder how it was done than be told how it was done. The two sisters even took up rapping again before Kate's death in 1892 and Maggie's in 1893.⁵⁹

Elisha Kane would have been horrified to see Margaret Fox's final days. She was destitute. Only days before her death, the *New York Times* reported that she was shortly to be evicted from her tenement house in New York.⁶⁰ She was taken in by a sympathetic spiritualist, only to die on March 8 at fifty-nine years of age.⁶¹ The *Daily Evening Telegraph* of Philadelphia reported, "Her face, once beautiful, was at the last marked by age and dissipation, and her one appetite was for intoxicating liquors. This wreck of womankind had been a guest in palaces and courts. The powers of mind, latter almost imbecile, were the wonder and study of scientific men in America, Europe, and Australia."⁶²

⁵⁸*New York Daily Tribune*, October 22, 1888.

⁵⁹Jackson, *Spirit Rappers*, 212-213.

⁶⁰*New York Times*, March 5, 1893.

⁶¹*New York Times*, March 10, 1893

⁶²*The Daily Evening Telegraph*, (Philadelphia), March 9, 1893.

Figure 19

We hereby approve of Mr. Reuben
B. Davenport's design to write a
true account of the origin of
Spiritualism and of our connection
therewith, and we authorize him to
make proper use of all data and
material that we furnish him.

New York, 15th Oct., 1888.

Margaret Fox Kane
Catherine Fox Decker

Margaret and Catherine Fox's signatures giving their approval to Reuben
Davenport's, *The Death-Blow to Spiritualism*.

The one group who still had some use for her were the spiritualists, who organized her funeral. The ceremony was presided over by Benjamin Franklin, who spoke through an entranced Rev. Charles Hicks. In addition to the hundreds of living mourners, the funeral was attended by Leah Fish Underhill and Horace Greeley, both of whom had been dead for several years.⁶³ It was perhaps the paradox of Margaret Fox's life that she strove for gentility and respectability at the same time that her only real support came from the spiritualists she so often despised.

⁶³*New York Times*, March 11, 1893; unidentified newspaper clipping, Dow Collection.

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