WILLIAM LYON MACKENZIE KING;
A VERY DOUBLE LIFE?
BY
ALLISON CHRISTINE BULLOCK

A thesis submitted to the Department of History
in conformity with the requirements
for the Degree of Master of Arts

Queen’s University
Kingston, Ontario, Canada

November, 2009

© Allison Christine Bullock, 2009
Abstract

This thesis examines the interest in spiritualism of Canada’s tenth Prime Minister, William Lyon Mackenzie King. By placing King’s engagement with spiritualism within the context of recent historiography on spiritualism as a progressive form of religion in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, this research demonstrates that spiritualism was not a pseudo-religion or parlour game but rather, a religious practice meaningful to King both as a component of his faith and his intellectual pursuits.

Within the context of this thesis, spiritualism is treated as a lived religion. Based on the research of Robert Orsi and David D. Hall, whose contention is that religion comes into existence only in a dynamic relationship with the realities of everyday life, particular attention is paid to those parts of King’s world that serve as the building blocks for his first encounters with spiritualism.

This research demonstrates that while King remained skeptical of spiritualist claims until later in his life, his eventual acceptance of spiritualism was the result of several factors. Though the deaths within his immediate family in the early 1900s served as a catalyst for King’s desire to seek spirit contact, it was his reading and involvement in social Christianity as early as 1891, when he began his studies at the University of Toronto that provided the scaffolding for King’s incorporation of spiritualism into his later life. It is argued that, ultimately, King’s goals remained consistent throughout his personal evolution: to lead a Christian life in service to the less fortunate and to the people of Canada.
Acknowledgements

Completion of this thesis would not have been possible without the guidance and support of my advisor, Dr. Marguerite Van Die. Her encouragement and expertise have been invaluable, and I am grateful for her willingness to work with a student who not only lived two hours away but also worked full time; thank-you for your generous patience and editorial insight.

Eight years ago, while a student at the University of Waterloo, I enrolled in a Canadian history course taught by the late Dr. Gerald Stortz. It was in this course that I was first encouraged to “take a look” at the King diaries. Thanks are due to Dr. Stortz; his infectious passion for his own research prompted me to pursue research in Canadian history.

For his certainty when I was uncertain and his steadfast support as I pursued my goal, I owe my deepest gratitude to my best friend and future husband, Luke.

My parents, Mike and Diana, have always supported my personal and educational goals. I thank them for their unfailing encouragement, understanding, and faith in my ability.

Thank-you to Shawn for his empathy as a graduate student and advice as a brother; it was nice to know someone else had been there. Thanks also to Deborah for her sense of humour, her interest in my research and all of the great food she shared with me.

I could not have done it without any of you.
Table of Contents

Abstract ................................................................................................................................. ii

Acknowledgements .................................................................................................................. iii

Chapter 1 - Mr. King or “Weird Willie”: reinterpreting King’s interest in spiritualism .......... 1

Chapter 2 – “God Direct my Path Aright”: Christianity as a progressive religion .............. 28

Chapter 3 – “A Most Remarkable Experience”: the continued quest into the spiritual......... 66

Bibliography ............................................................................................................................ 104
CHAPTER 1
Mr. King or “Weird Willie”: reinterpreting King’s interest in spiritualism

In an oft reprinted photograph, William Lyon Mackenzie King is seated in his study. It appears as though he is wistfully contemplating the framed photographs and trinkets on the table in front of him. However, follow King’s gaze and one’s eyes are drawn toward the portrait of his mother, Isabel, which hangs on the wall and dominates the photograph. Her painted image sits in front of a fireplace, eyes cast downward to the book she holds in her lap; her face is relaxed and her hair hangs loosely about her shoulders. She looks peaceful, almost ethereal. This portrait was commissioned by King; he adored his mother to the point that, some have suggested, Isabel’s love and approval had an addictive quality to her son.¹ King sought Isabel’s support throughout his life as well as after she died; he would note in his diary whenever something reminded him of his late “dear mother,” perceiving her spirit in a flower’s bloom or in the presence of a new acquaintance.² King hung the portrait of his mother in the private study of his Ottawa residence, Laurier House, where she could remain by his side. Perhaps his desire to keep a small lamp lit under her portrait, and a vase on the table always filled with fresh flowers was a

¹ Charlotte Gray, Mrs King, The Life and Times of Isabel Mackenzie King (Toronto: Penguin Canada,1997), 363.
² National Archives of Canada, William Lyon Mackenzie King, Diary (hereafter W.L. Mackenzie King, Diary). 13 February 1918, Series J13. In a diary entry from 25 February 1918, King noted that he “found Two beautiful white flowers in bloom on the little plant mother loved. – Spoke to them as to a voice from her- thought of Miss [X] as being sent by mother.” Also see W.L. Mackenzie King, Diary, 21 February 1918.
manifestation of King’s belief that his mother was “a pure, perfect little light in the midst of great darkness like her pure spiritual life in this materialistic world.”

Isabel King, daughter of Canada’s infamous “Little Rebel” William Lyon Mackenzie, died in 1917. Historians have often perceived her death as the catalyst for her son’s interest in spiritualism. Spiritualism, the belief that one can make contact and communicate with the spirits of the dead, would not only have allowed King to feel his mother’s presence, but speak with her as well. “How I do miss her dear, tender loving presence” King confessed to his diary in 1918, “– my consolation lies in the thought that she has entered upon life eternal, and that she is even near by, though unseen.”

Statements such as this are the reason Canada's tenth Prime Minister continues to baffle historians. While in recent years King has been given more credit for his achievements as Prime Minister, gaining recognition as having “extraordinary success in government,” his extensive personal papers, of which his diary alone is almost thirty thousand pages in length, have caused some controversy. The diary in particular, is one of the most important political documents in Canadian history and while it provides insight into

---


5 W.L. Mackenzie King, Diary, 1 February 1918.

national policy decisions both at the end of the Depression and during the Second World War, it has not been King’s navigation of these political minefields that have made him notorious in Canadian historical memory.\(^7\) Rather, it was the revelation, made possible through the diary that the former Prime Minister of Canada believed in spiritualism.

King’s belief that the human spirit lived on after death was rooted in his Christianity, and thus, in and of itself, not controversial. However, it was King’s attempts to make contact with spirits, which began tentatively in 1925, that moved him beyond orthodox Christian beliefs. That year King consulted Kingston fortune teller Rachel Bleaney. She was not a medium; mediums attempted to communicate directly with spirits.\(^8\) Instead, Bleaney claimed the ability to induce visions and receive messages from spirits, which she would interpret and relay to her clients. In King’s first reading with Bleaney, she saw a vision of Isabel standing beside King himself as a child; Isabel was patting him on the head. Bleaney predicted that King’s mother would be the first person King would meet in the afterlife and that he would “pass over” with no fear.\(^9\) King’s brother Max, deceased in 1922, also appeared standing beside Isabel, dressed as a doctor and holding a prescription bottle. Later, when King reflected upon the visions, he believed the appearance of his mother and brother meant that, “mother and Max, constantly at my side, [are] my guardian angels”.\(^10\) After this reading King asked Bleaney to make predictions on several occasions however, King became somewhat disillusioned with her abilities when Bleaney

---

\(^7\) Bliss Right Honourable Men, 123.

\(^8\) Braude, Radical Spirits, 20.

\(^9\) W.L. Mackenzie King, Diary, 1 March 1925.

\(^10\) Ibid.
told him he would win the 1930 election, an election that King lost to R.B. Bennett’s Conservatives.

In 1932 King received an invitation from a friend to participate in a séance conducted by Mrs. Etta Wriedt, a noted medium from Detroit. At this first séance, King was convinced he felt the spiritual presence of his parents, siblings, grandfather, Sir Wilfrid Laurier and his friend Bert Harper. As a direct voice medium, Wriedt allowed the voices of the spirits to speak through her, and so King would have been able to converse with the spirits of his loved ones. As his interest in spiritualism grew, King began to prefer the immediacy offered by other methods of spirit communication that did not require the presence of a medium. Table rapping was one such method. Harkening back to the Fox sister’s earliest attempts at spirit communication in the 1840s, table rapping required individuals to gather around a table, hold hands, and ask to speak with any spirits who might be present. The spirits would then make knocking sounds on the table in a morse code response. King would also record and interpret his dreams and take note of coincidences in his life including the position of the hands of the clock; if the clock hands were together, or at opposite angles, it meant someone in the other world was watching over him. King felt that dependence on a medium meant he was not receiving direct communication from

12 H. Blair Neatby, William Lyon Mackenzie King, The Prism of Unity (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1976), 73. In the first documented efforts of spirit communication in North America, the Fox family of Hydesville, New York, heard raps on the floors of their home. They had no doubt those noises should be attributed to spirits of the dead. In effort to escape the sounds that occurred consistently in the presence of the young Fox sisters, Katie and Margaret, in 1848 the family abandoned their haunted home and moved to Rochester, New York. The spirits followed, offering evidence that Katie and Margaret were, somehow, summoning their presence. Within months, neighbours were clamoring to hear the spirits, and eager to have their own spiritual experiences at home. Braude, Radical Spirits, 10-11.
spirits. Table-rapping, dream interpretation and coincidences were, according to King, far more reliable means of communication with spirits since there was no intermediary to distort the message.\textsuperscript{13}

It was difficult to comprehend how King could be under scrutiny in a highly public office for twenty-two years and not once publically reveal that he thought he could speak to spirits. Could King’s secretiveness be attributed to the shame he felt for leading a private life in such opposition to social norms? Could he have cultivated a public “front” in order to avoid arousing suspicion? Repeated attempts to explain an apparent dichotomy in King's personality have failed to yield significant results, and so King is remembered as both “Mr. King and Weird Willie,”\textsuperscript{14} more the latter than the former, since almost universally King's public persona has been deemed relentlessly dull.\textsuperscript{15} Indeed, King’s interaction with prostitutes, his four pet dogs who all shared the name “Pat”, his life long bachelorhood, devotion to his mother, and even his commitment to maintaining a diary, scarcely missing a day for fifty-seven years, have all contributed to King’s lasting reputation as an eccentric.\textsuperscript{16} Spiritualism, however, is the most contentious aspect of King’s personal life. It is historian C.P. Stacey who cites spiritualism as the reason that King actually led a “double life”, one in the public eye as a prominent politician, and another in private as a neurotic man who believed he could speak to friends and loved

\textsuperscript{13} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{14} Gray, “Crazy Like a Fox”, 45.
\textsuperscript{15} Will Ferguson, Bastards and Boneheads Canada's Glorious Leaders Past and Present (Toronto: McIntyre, 1999), 256.
ones in the afterlife.\textsuperscript{17} King’s interest in spiritualism will be the focus of this research. My intent is to take a revisionist approach to the existing King historiography that has dismissed spiritualism as a strange aberration. Instead, I propose to examine King within the context of recent literature that has focused on spiritualism as a form of religion that was able to flourish within a specific time and context.

It was in his diary that historians first learned of King’s spiritualism. He undertook diary writing as an experimental way to facilitate the development of his character and what began as an experiment is now the highlight of Mackenzie King fonds held at the National Archives of Canada.\textsuperscript{18} King’s diary, which he kept from 1893 until three days prior to his death in 1950, is part of a long history of diary writing that emerged in the nineteenth century. Diaries were a widely practiced and widely consumed literary form. Keeping a diary became fashionable for Victorians, serving not only as a record of events, but also as a means of self-improvement.\textsuperscript{19} Indeed King’s first diary entry from September of 1893 stated:

\begin{quote}
    The chief object of keeping this diary is that I may be ashamed to let even one day have nothing worthy of its showing, and it is hoped that through its pages the reader may be able to trace how the author sought to improve his time.\textsuperscript{20} [King’s emphasis]
\end{quote}

A flood of diary publication in the 1800s had been instigated by the publication of British Member of Parliament Samuel Pepys’ diary. Beginning in January of 1660, Pepys’ diary

\begin{footnotes}
\textsuperscript{17} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{18} W.L. Mackenzie King, Diary, 6 September 1893.
\textsuperscript{19} Francis Hoffman and R. Taylor, Much to Be Done. (Winnipeg: Hignell Printing, 1992), 2.
\textsuperscript{20} W.L. Mackenzie King, Diary, 6 September 1893.
\end{footnotes}
recorded events such as the Great Fire of London, the plague, and the coronation of King Charles II.\textsuperscript{21} Soon after its publication, diaries became components of popular fiction, journalism and drama.\textsuperscript{22} The preparation of one’s diary for posterity was widely practiced; some simply wrote a “good” copy while others produced a summary and destroyed the original.\textsuperscript{23} King intended to use his diary as the basis for his memoirs but died before he could take up his pen. King did, however instruct his literary executors to “destroy all of my diaries except those parts which I have indicated should be made available for publication or use.”\textsuperscript{24} King did not mark the appropriate passages and, as a result, both his records of state matters as well as his most private thoughts, were made available for public contemplation.

Edouard Handy, King’s private secretary from 1936 until 1950, was consulted regarding the public release of King’s diaries. Handy concluded that King would have wanted matters relating to public life made available to researchers, but he would not have wanted any private information, especially that given in confidence, made public. Hardy and Fred McGregor, King’s former secretary, decided to compile certain excerpts from King’s diaries for use by his official biographer, excerpts pertaining only to King’s public life and political career. After King biographers R. McGregor Dawson and H. Blair

\textsuperscript{21} Thomas Mallon, \textit{A Book of One’s Own, People and Their Diaries}, (New York: Tricknor& Fields, 1984), 2. Samuel Pepys, both a British MP and naval administrator, kept his diary between 1660 and 1669. Along with the events mentioned, he also recorded his own personal intrigues and observations of friends, family and co-workers. BBC History - Samuel Pepys (1633- 1703). BBC History. [http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/historic_figures/pepys_samuel.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/historic_figures/pepys_samuel.shtml)


\textsuperscript{23} Hewitt, “Diary, Autobiography and the Practice of Life History”, 33.

\textsuperscript{24} Library and Archives Canada. Saving a National Treasure – The Archival History of the Diary, Behind the Diary. [http://www.collectionscanada.gc.ca/king/053201/053201130801_e.html](http://www.collectionscanada.gc.ca/king/053201/053201130801_e.html)
Neatby had used excerpts from the diaries for the King biography, their value as a historical document became clear.

As archivists worked to organize and preserve the volumes, requests for access from historians studying everything from Victorian values, to the Great Depression, and World War II became more frequent.25 In 1971 the decision was made to make the diary available, in its entirety, to all researchers. Divided into two portions for its release the first, all entries spanning from 1893 to 1931, were made available to researchers through the National Archives of Canada in microfiche form. Upon release of the second portion of the diaries in 1980, the National Archives made it available in its entirety, on microfiche, to researchers across Canada. However, copies could only be found at select libraries and were in no way “user friendly.” The diaries are thirty thousand pages in length and with the absence of an index, at that time its use as a primary source for research required reading large sections, something that was time consuming and tedious at best. Today, research with the diaries is much different; almost all volumes have been digitized and are available on the National Archives website through an ArchiviaNet research tool entitled A Real Companion and Friend; The Diary of William Lyon Mackenzie King. In place of an index, the diary is searchable both by date and by keyword, making the diaries a more expedient research tool.26

25 Ibid.
26 Ibid.
There are ethical considerations to be made when private documents such as diaries are released to the public for the purpose of research. In his review of H.S. Ferns and Bernard Ostry’s King biography, *The Age of Mackenzie King Rise of a Leader*, historian W.P. Morrell notes that Ferns and Ostry were of the opinion the diaries should have been destroyed, since the more sensational passages detracted from King’s accomplishments as a politician.  

The extent to which the passages that speak to spiritualism are sensational is a matter that will be addressed in subsequent chapters. What is interesting is that, as those who study diaries as literary works are aware, many diarists have a sense of audience while they are writing.  

Vassar College English professor Thomas Mallon points out that, even though the diarists might claim to write only for themselves, diary writers create an audience as they record their thoughts because it is as if “someone will be reading and you’ll be talking. And if you’re talking, it means you’re alive.”  

King was aware of “you” in his writing and on more than on occasion addressed the reader directly. In the very first entry, King cites one reason for keeping the diary as a way for “the reader” to follow his journey of self improvement. It should be further noted that during the nineteenth-century, diaries, which by their nature would seem to be private documents, not only served as the basis for autobiographies, but were also widely published. While diarists during this time adhered to the ideal of the private diary, privacy

---

27 W.P. Morrell, “Untitled Review” in *The English Historical Review*, 285 (1957), 769. It should be noted that for the book *The Age of Mackenzie King Rise of a Leader* (London: Heinmann, 1955), Ferns and Ostry did not have full access to King’s diaries because they had not been released in its entirety at the time of the book’s publication. Morrell noted that this biography held an “undercurrent of hostility” and presented King as “Machiavellian.”  


29 Ibid.  

30 W.L. Mackenzie King, Diary, 6 September 1893.
was not maintained to ensure the diary was never read. Rather, privacy guaranteed the diarist would disclose their true feelings and opinions. Indeed, critical studies of published diaries emphasized authenticity and frankness as the traits of exemplary diaries.  

Research in this thesis will rely heavily upon King’s diaries. The diaries are an invaluable source since by its nature a diary is not a book that was written, but a book that “happened.” One can read any type of book, even an autobiography, without knowing the author, but it is virtually impossible to read a diary and remain unacquainted with the writer. As historical documents, personal diaries are important because they provide a glimpse of everyday life. Indeed, for this reason the collections of King’s diaries have been referred to as both an “incomparable record of Canada’s social and political history” and “the most important document in twentieth-century Canadian history.” Since research using the diaries is concerned with the outside influences that shaped King’s thoughts while he was a young man, the diary entries between 1891 and 1896, during the period that King was a university student, and during the late 1920s and early 1930s, when King took an active interest in spiritualism, are of particular interest. He was loathe to allow even one day pass without accomplishing something that would be worth

---

31 Hewitt, “Diary, Autobiography and the Practice of Life History”, 27.  
32 Mallon, A Book of One's Own, xviii.  
34 Library and Archives Canada “Saving a National Treasure: The Archival History of the Diary” Behind The Diary, http://www.collectionscanada.ca/king/053201/053201130801_e.html  
putting to paper.\textsuperscript{36} Indeed, in her detailed study of King’s reading, historian Margaret Bedore notes that King “habitually read for information and inspiration; he sought to perfect the mind, body and the soul.” \textsuperscript{37} As a result, in his diaries King would not only mention, but offer his opinion of the books and political pamphlets he read as well as sermons and lectures he attended and the people he met through the course of his day. Through his critical use of texts and his accompanying comments, it is possible to ascertain the development of King’s world view and the way in which he incorporated external influences into his Christian faith and moral philosophy.

This research will also draw on the \textit{Personal Correspondence} and \textit{Spiritualism} series’ of the King fonds held at Library and Archives Canada. King’s correspondence was extensive and this particular series contains cards, telegrams, letters and newspaper clippings sent to King by his family and closest friends. This series does not contain any letters from the general public or politicians; many of the letters are marked “Personal and confidential”. The \textit{Spiritualism} series also consists of an eclectic variety of sources both collected by King personally, and in some cases, forwarded to him by friends and acquaintances. These sources range from books to journals, newspaper clippings, and hand written séance records. Letters are also an important component of this series; King maintained regular correspondence both with mediums and friends who were also interested in spiritualism. When both the \textit{Spiritualism} and \textit{Personal Correspondence} series are used in conjunction with King’s diary, a more multi-dimensional picture of

\textsuperscript{36} W.L. Mackenzie King, Diary, 6 September 1893.

\textsuperscript{37} Margaret Bedore, “The Reading of Mackenzie King.” (PhD. Diss., Queen’s University, 2008), ii.
King’s personal life is formed, as opposed to a less comprehensive image that emerges through examination only of the references to spiritualism that are made in his diary.

Even though King never had the opportunity to use his diaries and personal papers for the memoirs he intended to write, there are several notable biographical studies of King that not only highlight his life, but touch upon his interest in spiritualism. Historian R. McGregor Dawson was named the official King biographer following King's death in 1950. In 1958 he published the first volume of King’s biography, entitled *William Lyon Mackenzie King, A Political Biography*. This work, based on the King papers, was written at a time when those papers had not been made available to researchers or the public at large. Chronicling his early years from 1874 to 1923, the first volume of the official biography mentions King’s interest in social Christianity and his desire to put his Christian principles into practice; Dawson even touches upon King's efforts to reform prostitutes in Toronto, something that would later be sensationalized by historian C.P. Stacey. Dawson died before he was able to complete the other two volumes of King's biography and H. Blair Neatby was appointed as his replacement. In both subsequent volumes, King the statesman is emphasized, and with the exception of one chapter in volume two, *The Lonely Heights*, and one in volume three, *The Prism of Unity*, little of the personal life that would later captivate so many Canadians is addressed. Though Neatby's volumes cover the time period when King was most interested in spiritualism,

---

38 Library and Archives Canada “Saving a National Treasure: The Archival History of the Diary” Behind The Diary, [http://www.collectionscanada.ca/king/053201/053201130801_e.html](http://www.collectionscanada.ca/king/053201/053201130801_e.html).
only briefly in volume two, which spans the years from 1932 to 1939, does Neatby address this topic. Acknowledging that King would later become a spiritualist, Neatby frames King’s belief in the presence of spirits within the context of loneliness:

His sense of isolation was mitigated by a belief in the continuing presence of the departed. Mackenzie King was not yet a spiritualist. Somehow he could accept coincidences as evidence that his loved ones were still with him...40

Neatby concludes by stating that even though King was uncertain of spiritualism in 1925, he would unconsciously move more closely toward it later in life.41 He returns to King's interest in spiritualism in volume three, this time emphasizing King’s advancing age and personal isolation as a result of his political role. While he outlines King's experiences with mediums, table rapping, and dream interpretation, Neatby treats King's experiences with spiritualism with discretion, resisting any urge to impose judgment as to King's common sense.

Unlike Neatby’s biography, in Mackenzie King of Canada author H. Reginald Hardy, a member of the press gallery in Ottawa during King’s second tenure as Prime Minister, makes no overt reference to spiritualism, but does acknowledge that King had “an intense interest in psychical research.”42 Psychical research was the effort to prove, through use of the scientific method, that the spirits seen and heard during séances were real.43 Hardy

41 Ibid., 203.
42 H. Reginald Hardy, Mackenzie King of Canada (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1949), 159.
43 Jenny Hazelgrove, Spiritualism and British Society Between the Wars (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000), 194.
went on to explain, “King has publicly stated that he believes in 'the survival of the human personality.' He has always felt that his friends and loved ones are near him.”

According to Hardy, King strongly believed that proof of the spiritual world was growing and with universities taking up psychical research, one day man would “find himself faced with incontrovertible evidence of the existence of a spiritual world.” In this instance, Hardy expressed King’s views in such a way as to indicate a strong conviction, which existed within the realm of mainstream Christian thought. Published in 1948 and drawing on a series of newspaper articles King himself approved prior to their publication, Hardy’s book offers no criticism or negative comment regarding King’s interest in the spiritual world. This would seem to suggest that admitting an interest in psychical research and life after death was not, at that time, particularly controversial or sensational if it was placed within the appropriate framework.

In 1976 C.P. Stacey published a book that has had a significant impact on Canadian historiography surrounding King’s personal beliefs and practices, in particular his interest in spiritualism. Dawson and Neatby’s official biographical volumes were published between 1958 and 1976, and thus, Stacey was not the first author to attempt to gain insight to King’s character through his diaries. However, Stacey was the first not only to reexamine, but also to sensationalize King’s private life using the entries from the diaries that had been omitted from King’s official biography. In *A Very Double Life: The Private*

---

41 Hardy, *Mackenzie King of Canada*, vii and 159.
45 Ibid, 160. Psychical research will be discussed at greater length in chapter 3.
46 Ibid., 158. Hardy depicts King as a devote Christian man when he notes “the religious side of King’s nature is highly developed… he reads his Bible every day.”
World of Mackenzie King, Stacey paints the unforgiving portrait of King that remains the basis for most subsequent interpretations of King’s personal life. Stacey suggests more than once that King’s private life was irrational because he believed in spiritualism. The title of the book itself is based on an 1898 passage in King’s diary when he confessed that he felt as though he led “a very double life.” On that occasion, King had attended church and heard a sermon about duplicity and pretence and, in an effort to “take all that was said home” concluded that he fit the model of duplicity the minister presented. While it is clear from the diary entry that King was aware he committed sin, though he strove to be a good Christian, it is not at all to be concluded that King’s reference to a “double life” was an attempt to hide his supposed “true nature” from the world. Nevertheless, as historian Charlotte Gray would later note, thanks to this interpretation, “Stacey’s book transformed the image of King from a canny politician to a selfish, strange little man.”

Stacey’s analysis of King’s character has held sway with popular imagination even when scholarly literature has been much less sensational. However, even the more compassionate treatments of King’s spiritualism, such as Neatby’s official biography The Prism of Unity, tend to accept King’s spiritual beliefs as simply the survival tactics of a lonely man who needed the support and approval of loved ones. Neatby suggests that spiritualism was both “unorthodox” and “eccentric” but that King’s reliance on it could

47 Stacey, A Very Double Life, 176, 177, 184. King was almost sixty years old when he took part in his first séance. In his discussion of King’s belief in spiritualism, Stacey questions whether King’s advancing age had “dimmed his intellectual powers,” leading to the naiveté that allowed him to believe in his séance experiences.
48 W.L. Mackenzie King, Diary, 13 February 1898.
49 Gray, Mrs. King, xii.
be forgiven since he needed the emotional stability that contact with the deceased
sympathetic treatment of King's interest in spiritualism, but she also assumes that King
was unusual because of the draw spiritualism held for him. Esberey attributes King's
spiritual practices to the "inadequacy of orthodox religion to deal with King's emotional

crisis following the virtual disintegration of his family,"\footnote{Joy Esberery, \textit{Knight of the Holy Spirit: A Study of William Lyon Mackenzie King} (Toronto: University of
Toronto Press, 1980), 126.} and suggests that it was the
deaths in his family that drove King to seek comfort in "less conventional channels of
support."\footnote{Ibid., 126.} She concludes "in the context of King's neurosis it is suggested that
spiritualism is best regarded as a defense mechanism directed to easing tensions and
anxieties aroused in the public world."\footnote{Ibid., 132.} Despite Esberey's sympathetic analysis of
King's personal life, her use of the word "neurosis" coupled with the assertion that
spiritualism was a defense mechanism rather than a legitimate system of beliefs, again,
places King's actions outside of societal norms.

The uneasiness with which spiritualism is regarded in scholarly sources has meant that
King's reputation as a politician, and even as a man, has been cast into question; this,
given the modern assumption that all mediums, séances, and experiences attributed to
spiritual contact could only be fraudulent.\footnote{Stacey, \textit{A Very Double Life}, 10.}

\footnote{Neatby, \textit{William Lyon Mackenzie King, The Prism of Unity}, 79.}
\footnote{Joy Esberery, \textit{Knight of the Holy Spirit: A Study of William Lyon Mackenzie King} (Toronto: University of
Toronto Press, 1980), 126.}
\footnote{Ibid.}
\footnote{Ibid., 132.}
\footnote{Stacey, \textit{A Very Double Life}, 10.}
King’s personal papers and diary, he felt compelled to assess King’s intellect. He concluded:

…the assessment I fear can only be unfavourable... The mere fact of his being a spiritualist scarcely makes him a simpleton, though some would argue so. It is the extraordinary crudity of the manifestations of his spiritualism, the shattering naïveté... that leave one with the ineradicable impression of limited intelligence.  

Stacey postulated that had King’s friend and confidante Joan Patteson, who participated in many of his séances and table rapping sessions, allowed her sense of humor to have freer rein she might have been able to curb King’s extravagant interpretations of spiritual contact. Though Stacey acknowledged that simply being a spiritualist did not make King unintelligent, he did suggest that King was naive for not perceiving the fraudulence of his séance experiences.  

Considering his posthumous notoriety as a spiritualist, it may seem odd that King did not attend his first séance until 1932, when he was fifty-eight years old. It may also seem remarkable that a man with a strong Christian faith, who at one time considered a career in the ministry, would take any interest in spiritualism. Since historians often associate spiritualism with eccentricity, King’s interest has placed him firmly outside of social norms. Therefore, this thesis will place spiritualism within the context of the time that it developed. It will be argued that, far from an activity interesting only lonely eccentrics, spiritualism was in fact a religion that, well into the twentieth century, interested

55 Ibid., 175.
56 Ibid., 177.
57 Ramsay Cook, The Regenerators, Social Criticism in Late Victorian English Canada (Toronto: University of Toronto Press. 1985) 197.
progressively-minded individuals.

Here, a brief survey of recent literature focusing on spiritualism is illuminating. Focusing on the early development of spiritualism in America beginning in the 1840s, historian Ann Braude encourages the acceptance of spiritualism as a religion, a movement of the devout, not as a movement of the misguided. Spiritualism demanded nothing of its followers, asking only that people investigate and observe the phenomena that occurred when attempts at spirit contact were made.\(^{58}\) Braude notes that spiritualism accommodated a broad range of views that consciously sought to augment traditional Christianity; there was no orthodox doctrine, “it had no membership because it had nothing for its adherents to belong to… Mediums received no training and no ordination.”\(^{59}\) Indeed, spiritualism could be mistaken as a secular movement since no permanent institutions or organizations resembling an orthodox church were ever established. However, since spiritualism asserted that divine truth was accessible to every person through spirit communication, it provided an alternative to orthodox religion, offering a new forum for progressive personal, social, and political views. Therefore, spiritualists “adopted a radical social program based on the same individualist principles that supported its unconventional religious practice.”\(^{60}\)

In particular during the late 1800s, spiritualism was appealing to proponents of liberal social causes such as women’s suffrage. The morality of the home and family was the

\(^{58}\) Ibid.
\(^{59}\) Ibid, 7-8.
\(^{60}\) Ibid., 6.
responsibility of Victorian women. Nevertheless, women were discouraged from even speaking aloud in church.\textsuperscript{61} Spiritualism was regarded as a progressive form of religion in part because it rejected the notion that women were unsuited to public religious roles. Anne Braude notes that “the very qualities that rendered women incompetent when judged against norms for masculine behaviour rendered them capable of mediumship.”\textsuperscript{62} Other historians such as Alex Owen, whose research focuses on the role of British women in spiritualism at the turn of the century, have noted that spiritualism was still regarded as progressive during the interwar years, though for a different reason; spiritualism became closely linked to a new branch of science known as psychical research. According to Hereward Carrington, leader of the American Psychical Institute, psychical research was a form of progressive scientific research. Through this research, cases of spiritual phenomena would be authenticated in order to provide evidence for a new branch of science.\textsuperscript{63} Chapter three will discuss psychic research and its efforts to increase human awareness and further scientific research.

From the time of its inception in the mid nineteenth-century, spiritualism provided evidence of what religious leaders had been claiming all along: that the human spirit was capable of surviving after death, existing in an intangible afterlife reserved for those who had led a righteous life.\textsuperscript{64} When spiritualism emerged in North America in the mid 1800s, the people who were drawn to it were “converted” for a variety of reasons, but historians

\begin{flushleft}
\textsuperscript{61} Ibid., 82-83.
\textsuperscript{62} Ibid., 83 and Owen, \textit{The Darkened Room}, 9.
\textsuperscript{64} Braude, \textit{Radical Spirits}, 4.
\end{flushleft}
have noted that most often a new belief in spiritualism followed the death of a loved one.\textsuperscript{65} Death was familiar to King. Between 1901 and 1922 King’s best friend, older sister, father, mother and younger brother died. His family was decimated, and by the mid 1920s, King’s younger sister, the sole surviving member of his immediate family, had moved with her husband to Barrie, Ontario, while King was many hours away in Ottawa.\textsuperscript{66} Despite these personal tragedies, the assertion that King’s interest in spiritualism developed entirely as a by-product of the lonely existence of a man who devoted his life to public office and lost his family at an early age is not sufficiently convincing.\textsuperscript{67} Additional consideration needs to be devoted to the time and context in which King lived. Historian Jackson Lears argues that by the late nineteenth-century, people in the Western world had begun to realize that modern culture had not produced greater freedom or self-sufficiency. Instead, modernity had provoked a sense of moral and spiritual weakness.\textsuperscript{68} This weakness was born of “over-civilization.” At that time, modern culture placed an emphasis on a “cult of science and technical rationality,” and a “worship of material progress.”\textsuperscript{69} Lears identifies the educated bourgeoisie as those who most yearned for authentic experiences, becoming opposed to a life that was centered on

\textsuperscript{65} Ibid., 52.  
\textsuperscript{66} Library and Archives Canada, “Janet (“Jennie”) Lindsay King (1876-1962) - Mackenzie King-Exhibitions” Behind the Diary, \url{http://www.collectionscanada.gc.ca/king/05320113/053201130403_e.html}. 
\textsuperscript{68} Jackson Lears, \textit{No Place of Grace, Antimodernism and the Transformation of America} (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), 4-5.  
\textsuperscript{69} Ibid., 4.
material comfort and moral complacency. In chapter two, it will be argued that King, who possessed characteristics of the educated bourgeoisie, also yearned to experience life, in particular while he was an undergraduate student at the University of Toronto in the early 1890s. At that time King was not interested in spiritualism; however, he actively developed a greater awareness of his Christian faith and sense of the immortality of the human spirit.

Chapter two therefore examines King’s spiritual roots in the reform-minded Christianity of his time. King grew up as a member of the Presbyterian Church whose progressive Protestantism during the 1890s sought to alleviate what the church perceived as moral and spiritual ambiguity in urban areas. Known as the Social Gospel, in Canada this movement held particular appeal for Anglican, Methodist, Presbyterian, and Congregationalist denominations because it was grounded in the belief that mobilization of the church, in cooperation with legislation of the state, would allow for the development of a more Christian Canada. The churches set their sights on the urban poor and working class, hoping to instill a Christian love of God and avert any further moral degradation during the development of Canadian cities. They sought to achieve this through the ideal of Christ’s Kingdom on earth. In 1896 King recorded in his diary a desire to “earnestly pray that my life may be used to its fullest for Christ & my fellow

---

70 Ibid., 5.
72 Ibid., 2.
man.” King wanted to take part in the mobilization of the churches because he had a strong sense of vocation; no matter what profession he chose, his ultimate goal would be to put his Christian ideals into practice. King recognized though, that if he were to aid the creation of Christ’s Kingdom on earth, he would have to reflect upon his own faith and strive to greater personal morality in order to lead an exemplary Christian life.

How did King’s desire to lead an exemplary Christian life coexist with his interest in spiritualism? By the 1930s, according to biographer H. Blair Neatby, King’s “was no idle flirtation with an intriguing pastime;” King was, by then, fully invested in spiritual pursuits. Chapter three builds on the previous chapter’s discussion of King’s evolving faith, examining how social Christianity laid the groundwork for King’s later interest in spiritualism. The late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century developments in science have led historians to argue that many individuals were questioning Orthodox Christianity during that time, and spiritualism acted as an alternative faith. In fact for many, spiritualism did not exist in opposition to established religious denominations. Rather for them, spiritualism augmented their faith, providing empirical evidence of the immortality of the human soul.

73 W.L. Mackenzie King, Diary, 17 October 1896.
74 Gray, Mrs. King, 197.
76 Cook, The Regenerators, 67. Historian Sarah Z. Burke has termed this the “crisis of faith” analysis, and her views are discussed in greater detail in chapter three.
77 Braude, Radical Spirits, 2.
Throughout chapters two and three I draw on the methodology of “lived religion” as a way to understand the religious world that King fashioned during his years as a university student and later as he moved toward the study and practice of spiritualism. According to cultural historian Robert Orsi, the study of lived religion examines practice as well as “ideas, gestures, imaginings, all as media of engagement with the world.” 78 Several key factors are relevant to understanding King’s religious practice and how he evolved to incorporate his Presbyterian roots in social Christianity with an intense personal conviction in the ability to communicate with spirits.

Orsi’s conclusions indicate that an understanding of social structures such as kinship, moral responsibilities and expectations are important in the understanding of what shapes religion. In the case of King, his immediate family was central to his social sphere; he, his three siblings and parents cultivated a life that appeared to biographer R. McGregor Dawson, to be very happy. 79 Dawson goes on to say that the King family’s deep affection for one another appeared to stem from sympathy, humor, and a fierce loyalty within their immediate familial circle. 80 The King family was fractured by the death in the first quarter of the twentieth century. Historians such as Anne Braude have noted that those who first chose to attend a séance often were looking to communicate with friends and family who had died. To these individuals, spiritualism provided “concrete descriptions

80 Ibid.
of the fate of loved ones after death.”"81 Kinship relationships are part of the social experiences Orsi believes must be conceptualized in order to understand religious practice. A discussion of family relationships and dynamics are of particular importance in the examination of King’s relationship with spiritualism and will be examined in greater detail in chapter three, because through séances and spiritual experiences, King sought reassurance that his loved ones remained near to him.82

Important factors in the study of lived religion are the conflicts and tensions that can develop as a result of changing social structures. According to Orsi, tensions create dynamic changes within a religion.83 King first perceived tensions in the social fabric of Toronto in the 1890s; he was concerned with the social problems of the city and felt an obligation to fulfill his duty as a Christian man. King confessed to his diary, “to my mind this has always been & is one of the most perplexing problems, what does all of this evil mean, what is to be the result and what is to become of the larger masses of ignorant & thriftless persons!”84 Throughout his life, King desired to find a place for Christianity in a world in which evil seemed to have the upper hand and people had “lost their faith in the hope of a spiritual life to come.”85 In the 1930s, King conducted psychical research, investigating spiritual phenomena through various means in order to understand and resolve the conflict surrounding the continuation of the human spirit. King wanted to

81 Braude, Radical Spirits, 40.
84 W.L. Mackenzie King, Diary, 29 September 1894.
85 Hardy, Mackenzie King of Canada, 160.
become a man “who had been true to the faith, and sought to be a follower of His Lord and Master Jesus Christ.”

One final aspect of King’s lived religion must be kept in mind, what Orsi identifies as an understanding of the corporeality of people who participate in religious practice. This means that research should consider how people ‘know,’ that is, how the abstract is made concrete to them through their senses. King was an academic by training, and as a result, he wanted, intellectually, to understand what he experienced in the presence of a medium. Therefore, chapter three will also look at King’s interest in psychical research, a movement that developed in tandem with spiritualism as an empirical and scientific look at the phenomena that spiritualists experienced. Table rapping, dream interpretation, the note of coincidences, were all ways in which King sought to study his relationship with the afterlife.

Inevitably, the question of legitimacy surrounds any discussion of spiritualism; were the conversations that King had during séances with his friends and family actual conversations with spirits? Or, were these experiences nothing more than the by-product of King’s imagination, wishful thinking encouraged by deceptive mediums? To address such questions, this study focuses on what, according to Orsi, were the idiomatic possibilities that existed within King’s cultural environment, that is, why and how King came to embrace spiritualism and progressive thought, and how he incorporated these into

---

86 W.L. Mackenzie King, Diary, 28 July 1934.
his existing belief system. The authenticity of séance experiences is not my concern, only that King had faith in their authenticity. More pertinent to this study is the way in which King’s spiritual experiences and psychic research augmented his existing faith and allowed him to lead the Christian life in service that he desired. Therefore, it will be argued that King was concerned both with discerning true spiritual experiences in order to gain awareness of how the human mind could evolve to a higher level of consciousness, as well as facilitating the overall moral improvement of society and humanity.

Often, when King’s name is mentioned Canadians who remember him will make reference to what they believe are the scandalous aspects of his character: “oh yes, he was a weirdo wasn’t he? Didn’t he talk to his dead dog and roam the nighttime Toronto streets looking for ladies of the night?” Early commentators of King’s diary were struck by the sensationalism of entries that were likely not intended for public contemplation, as one historian has noted, “…the occult side of King revealed in his private papers has baffled scholars, who either have not comprehended his insights or could not forgive such quackery.” Using the dimensions of lived religion as a framework, I will demonstrate that, through the study of how King engaged with his world, an alternate picture of his personal life can be painted; instead of perpetuating “Weird Willie” one can re-discover “Mr. King.” King's interest in spiritualism was part of a lifetime effort to create an all-

88 Braude, Radical Spirits, 18-19.
89 W.L.Mackenzie King, Diary, 12 April 1933.
90 Bowering, Egotists and Autocrats, 206.
91 R.H. Keyserlingk, “Mackenzie King’s Spiritualism and His View of Hitler in 1939” in D. Avery and R. Hall, Coming of Age: Readings in Canadian History since World War Two (Toronto: Harcourt Bruce, 1996), 47.
encompassing belief system. Moreover, drawing extensively on the recent literature surrounding spiritualism and psychic research at the turn of the century, I will note that King was not alone in his desire to create ties between the physical and metaphysical worlds; indeed for many, a move toward spiritualism felt natural and inevitable.\textsuperscript{92}

\textsuperscript{92} Hazelgrove, \textit{Spiritualism and British Society}, 2.
CHAPTER 2
“God Direct My Path Aright”¹: Christianity as a progressive religion

An examination of how King saw his path to be directed “aright” begins with his first year of post-secondary education at the University of Toronto in 1891. The experiences that King had in Toronto as an undergraduate student and later as a graduate student at the University of Chicago and Harvard University, and his reading of pertinent literature, are emphasized throughout this chapter. A student in the Department of Political Economy, a member of the first university chapter of the YMCA, a court reporter for a Toronto newspaper, a volunteer at Hull House in Chicago, and a Christian living in large, urban centres, King’s experiences shaped his notion of social Christianity. His faith led him to pursue not only a career in the public service, but also, as will be developed in the next chapter, provided the scaffolding for his later belief in spiritualism.

In the 1890s, a visitor to Toronto would have been impressed by its prosperity. A city immersed in the throes of an industrial revolution, Toronto was a modern urban centre with separate commercial and residential neighbourhoods, piped water, and gas lighting.² Though visitors may have been impressed by these modern amenities, Toronto was not a likable city. It was cold, unwelcoming, and aloof; it was known to be “rough-and-ready.”³ Many people did not own property and though widespread transience was common, it was also regarded as a menace to society. Men who could not find work were forced to take temporary jobs and beg for food. Affixed with the label of “tramp” by the respectable middle class of the 1890s, these people

¹ W.L. Mackenzie King, Diary, 13 August 1897. King recorded this prayer in his diary after feeling particularly inspired to accomplish something meaningful in his life.
symbolized the perceived declining morality of the city. Poverty, crime, and class conflict were the primary manifestations of a malaise with which cities, in general, seemed to be afflicted. 4

When he began his post secondary studies at the University of Toronto in 1891, it was this industrialized Toronto that greeted an almost seventeen-year-old William Lyon Mackenzie King. King was born and raised in Berlin where his parents, John and Isabel, had moved as newlyweds to begin their family. At the turn of the century, Berlin was not a typical southern Ontario town. It was founded by German-speaking Pennsylvanian Mennonites and in the 1830s, an additional influx of Germanic people from Europe turned Berlin into a primarily German-speaking community. 5 While it shared some of Toronto’s industrial characteristics, Berlin was actually different from Toronto in many ways. By the end of the nineteenth-century, when King had reached adolescence, Berlin was a prosperous small town dominated by factories and “obsessed with the virtues of hard work and thrift.” 6 Though it may have shared Toronto’s industrial fervor, Berlin did not share its modernity; the main street was muddy no matter the weather, and livestock roamed as they pleased among carriages and pedestrians. 7

An 1887 report from the Royal Commission on the Relations of Labour and Capital expressed concern regarding the social effects of industrialization in urban areas and concluded that most industrial workers lived in poverty owing to low wages or unemployment. Church leaders and reformers, who regarded the growth of Canadian cities with consternation and anxiety, believed

6 Gray, Mrs. King, 64.
7 Ibid.
Canada would possess slums similar to those found in New York or London unless something was done. In his biography of Methodist minister Salem Bland, historian Richard Allen notes that, as Canadians during this time were confronted with railway expansion, new technology, and increasing social mobility, “militant forms of Christianity, both Catholic and Protestant, were in an expansive mode,” confident they had the tools to cope with changing times. Religious leaders, driven by this sense of urgency, began to conduct campaigns to arouse public consciousness and spur action. As a result, many Canadian Protestants came to believe that social problems created by urban growth and industrial development could be combated through missionary work in the city. Churches evolved accordingly; the concern of religious leaders for the moral character of Toronto acted as a powerful incentive for institutional adaptation.

Richard Allen believes it is a modern tendency to polarize the terms “evangelical” and “liberal”. In the late Victorian era, the terms were closely linked in their ability to free the human spirit from “the twin paternalisms of church and state.” The emphasis on humans as a species brought forth through Charles Darwin’s new ideas in biology and Herbert Spencer’s new ideas in sociology, allowed a more organic view of society to emerge. Allen goes on to explain that a new social evangelicalism and new social liberalism... coalesced around positive uses of state and collective ventures to protect working people oppressed by a rampant industrial order and to promote a more egalitarian society.

---

9 Richard Allen, *The View from Murney Tower, Salem Bland, the Late-Victorian Controversies, and the Search for a New Christianity* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2008), xvi.
10 Ibid., 4.
12 Allen, *The View from Murney Tower, xx.*
13 Ibid.
During the late Victorian period, Christians embraced this social evangelicalism and liberalism. King was no exception; times were changing and King viewed that aiding the “ignorant and thriftless” was synonymous with leading a Christian life. Indeed, in 1896 King recorded in his diary that he prayed for his life to be used in serve both Christ and his fellow man.14

Faith and religion were always at the forefront in King’s life. Of Scots heritage, King and his siblings were brought up as members of the Presbyterian Church of Canada. They attended church every Sunday and participated in various church events such as picnics, choir, and church suppers. In an 1895 letter to King while he was studying at the University of Toronto, his younger sister Jennie commented:

Father has just commenced reading aloud out of the ‘Presbyterian’ & dear knows when he’ll let up.[emphasis Jennie’s] It is decidedly awkward to try to write to you while this performance is going on… Thank heaven! Father has ‘let up’ at last. It is lovely to hear him read but not when you are trying to write…15

Jennie’s letter to her older brother conveys the familiar Christian atmosphere in which the King children were immersed at home; it was a home in which denominational publications, Bible verses and church bulletins were read aloud and hymns were sung at the piano.16 Victorians believed that the Christian home was the key to moral transformation of society, and so Isabel and John King would have made every effort to ensure their household reflected Christian values. For Victorians, the home was viewed as a sacred institution, with the “family altar” at the centre. This often included morning and evening prayers, Bible reading and hymns led by one or both parents. Sunday churchgoing was essential as well; Sunday observances began with

14 W.L. Mackenzie King, Diary, 17 October 1896.
15 Jennie King to W.L.Mackenzie King, Correspondence, 8 August 1895, Series J 8, Reel C 4864, NAC.
Saturday evening bath and lasted twenty-four hours, including Sunday morning worship, Sabbath school, and a second afternoon church service.\(^{17}\) The Kings maintained a strong Presbyterian devotion.

As Presbyterians, the King family also had opportunities to participate in church social work, in particular when they moved to Toronto in 1893. Presbyterian social work was based on the notion that Christianity was a social religion concerned with the quality of human relations.\(^{18}\) While John and Isabel King were not involved in social work, at some time or another all of their children were.\(^{19}\) In fact, Bella and Jennie’s involvement in the church’s good causes raised the ire of their father. John felt this was an unnatural and unsuitable way for young girls to spend their time; ministering to society’s “undesirables” was the responsibility of old maids past the age of marriage.\(^{20}\)

For King, the most prominent aspect of his Protestantism was a sense of vocation. From an early age King was convinced that whatever path he walked in life his ultimate goal would be the same: putting his Christian ideals into practice.\(^{21}\) Politics was not an inevitable career for King. While he was a student at the University of Toronto, he expressed a desire to become a Christian minister, feeling it was a valid and noble pursuit. In 1902 King recorded in his diary that it would only be awhile “before my life would begin to influence men from the platform, whether

---


\(^{19}\) Dawson, *W.L.M.K. A political Biography*, 15-16.


\(^{21}\) Cook, *The Regenerators*, 197.
in the pulpit or parliament I know not. Possibly the former first. God has a plan…”

At the same time, King had a strong sense of carrying on the work of his grandfather and namesake, William Lyon Mackenzie. The first mayor of Toronto and notorious “little rebel,” Mackenzie had sought to bring greater power to the people of Toronto through the Rebellion of 1837. In his diary King confessed his desire to carry on his maternal grandfather’s legacy:

This afternoon I got a copy of Life & Times of Grandfather from the library…how could I help it feeling his every thought in my own breast [?] His mantle has felled upon me, and it shall be taken up and worn. I never felt it could be done before I see it now…His voice, his words, shall be heard in Canada again and the cause he so nobly fought shall be carried on.

King trusted that God had chosen a path for him and he felt bound to take that path even if it was not entirely clear, “Trust thyself & of God’s purpose for my life,” he wrote, “I wish I were sure …that God has great work for me to do. I believe he has, and the course will open more clearly every day and year.”

King’s personal aim to carry on the family legacy of fighting for the common man, coupled with his certainty that God would direct his path in life, also allowed him to, as a student, embrace the new philosophical idealism as an affirmation of his own Christianity. King saw idealism as a way to bridge the gap between the rich and poor. In late Victorian academic circles, idealism found its origins at academic institutions such as Oxford University where “the moral incentive

22 W.L. Mackenzie King, Diary, 12 January 1902.
23 Mackenzie is remembered in the early history of Upper Canada for his attempt to thwart the Family Compact. A small group of wealthy families based in Toronto during the 1800s, the Family Compact had full control of the judiciary, most of the Canadian colony’s trade, and significant influence over the local Anglican Church. Mackenzie felt they governed Toronto as their personal fiefdom and in December 1837, was able to rouse several hundred men to take up arms against the colonial administration. His attempted coup did not meet with success and Mackenzie was forced to flee to the United States where he lived in exile with his family for twelve years. Gray, Mrs. King, 18.
24 W.L. Mackenzie King, Diary, 26 February 1898.
25 Ibid., 9 January 1902.
of philosophical idealism and empirical study of society"26 were closely linked. Oxford idealist philosopher T.H. Green imparted to his students an obligation to realize their “higher selves” through service to others. The social thought of Green and his contemporary Arnold Toynbee, who will be discussed later, were influential in the development of British social work. In Toronto, an authoritative social ethic comprised of moral and scientific intensions and supported by the British experience developed within the University of Toronto academic community. Historian Sarah Burke terms this social ethic the “Toronto Ideal.” She notes a strong bridge between the moral beliefs of British idealism and social service in the University of Toronto community was created with arguments that had been previously employed by British social critics, namely, that empirical research could be used to solve social problems. 27

It was the appointment of James Loudon as the President of the University of Toronto in 1892 that allowed students to pursue idealism and champion the twin goals of social reform and evangelism.28 In his 1898 convocation address, Loudon declared that the university should not function solely as the transmitter of knowledge, but fulfill a higher function by contributing to human knowledge. As a result, Loudon encouraged the pursuit of individual research interests among professors and students alike, as a way to expand intellectual and personal horizons.29 Thus the beginning of King’s academic career in 1891 corresponded with this period of intellectual and institutional expansion at the University of Toronto. When King enrolled, not

26 Burke, Seeking the Highest Good, 5.
27 Ibid., 4, 5.
28 Ibid., 33.
29 Ibid.

34
only had student enrolment increased, but so had the teaching staff. The university now boasted medicine, engineering and law as fields of professional training. 30

One notable expansion at the University was the addition of the Department of Political Economy. Formed in the late 1880s, the Department’s curriculum was inspired by the idealist ethic of British economist Arnold Toynbee. Educated at Oxford University, Toynbee believed that social betterment could be achieved if all classes were united by a shared sense of citizenship. 31 Travelling throughout England and speaking to the working class, he told his audiences that “the lowest levels of society needed to be taught the same standard of citizenship exhibited by the highest” 32 and this level of citizenship could be achieved through government-supported housing and education. Toynbee believed industrialization created barriers; instead, every person should consider him or herself as part of one great people.

Toynbee died in 1883 while giving an address to a crowd of young men in England. He was only thirty. Despite his young age, and the fact that his speeches had done little to spark enthusiasm among working class audiences, young middle class men were exhilarated by his words. 33 It was the sincerity of his vision that carried Toynbee’s idealism to Canada, and in his 1888 convocation address University of Toronto, President Loudon’s predecessor Daniel Wilson announced his belief that the study of political economy would foster a sense of civic duty and equip students with the tools to remedy contemporary social problems. With this in mind,

31 Burke, Seeking the Highest Good, 11.
32 Ibid., 11.
33 Ibid. In a brief memoir, an associate from Oxford, recalled Toynbee’s influence as devoid of ambition and vanity; “the secret of his influence... was his transparent sincerity.” Benjamin Jowett, introduction to Lectures on the Industrial Revolution of the 18th Century in England, Popular Addresses, Notes and other Fragments by Arnold Toynbee (New York, The Humboldt Publishing Co., 1884 ), x.
William J. Ashley, a British scholar and close follower of Arnold Toynbee, was hired to develop the University of Toronto political economy curriculum.\(^{34}\)

Ashley began his appointment at the University of Toronto in 1888, just three years prior to King’s arrival as an undergraduate student. Ashley was given complete control over the undergraduate curriculum; it was his curriculum which permeated King’s course work.\(^{35}\) Ashley believed the study of economics should have significance beyond the classroom and his goal was to broaden the outlook of each student. It was a time when, to cite historian Jackson Lears, “the internalized morality of self control and autonomous achievement ... seemed at the end of its tether,”\(^{36}\) and so Ashley combined moral training with empirical research in order to equip students with the ability to evaluate contemporary social problems. Ashley’s philosophy of political science was that knowledge acquired through social observation was useful to the political process, since the ultimate goal of political science was to instigate reform.\(^{37}\) Though he held his appointment at Toronto for only three years, Ashley’s curriculum and legacy were secure; the high regard with which he was held at the university allowed him to select his own successor. James Mavor, a journalist and academic well known in British intellectual circles, filled Ashley’s post as professor of political economy in October of 1892.

Though not formally trained in political economy as Ashley had been, Mavor’s personal interest in this area of thought was sparked by a concern for social conditions. Initially he had been a member of the Social Democratic Federation (SDF); founded in 1884 by H.M. Hyndman, the

\(^{34}\) Burke, *Seeking the Highest Good*, 17.

\(^{35}\) Ibid., 22.


\(^{37}\) Burke, *Seeking the Highest Good*, 22-23.
SDF claimed to be the first socialist organization of importance in Britain. However, Mavor left their ranks, finding political economy to be a more appropriate alternative.\textsuperscript{38} Mavor defined political economy as “…much more than a political science... [i]t deals much more with those social forces which control distribution, production, apart from direct national administration.”\textsuperscript{39} Like Ashley, Mavor believed that political economy should be grounded in morality and should strive for social improvement using empirical study as its primary tool.\textsuperscript{40}

The Political Economy Department at the University of Toronto attracted some of the most promising minds to emerge from the University during the last decade of the nineteenth century. King had begun his university career in 1891 as a student in the Faculty of Arts. At the end of his first year he was awarded the Blake Scholarship in political science and history and during his second year at university, King entered the honours course in politics at the Department of Political Economy. King’s remaining three years were filled with courses on politics, constitutional history, law, and economics; King stood top of his class in most of these subjects.\textsuperscript{41} James Mavor was King’s professor of political economy throughout his undergraduate career.\textsuperscript{42} At first, King and Mavor’s relationship was amicable, but it deteriorated

\textsuperscript{38} Mavor had been attracted to socialism because he felt socialists were one of the few British groups seriously considering social questions, but when Mavor left their ranks he cited disillusionment with the authoritarian tendencies of Marxism as the reason. Ironically, some believe the primary problem with the SDF was its lack of organization; it seems that Hyndman was not able to commit to a way to bring about the socialist revolution. The SDF was caught between preaching the doctrine of class struggle in order to fuel working class discontent, and spreading the Marxist message while waiting for the established order to collapse under its own weight. By the end of the 1880s the party membership was small, though it did play an important part in exposing the injustice of working conditions to unskilled workers. Paul Adelman, \textit{The Rise of the Labour Party, 1880-1945} (London: Addison Wesley Longman Ltd., 1996), 3-6.

\textsuperscript{39} W.L. Mackenzie King, Memoranda and Notes, R10383-10-9-E, Series J 4, Reel 2475 NAC.

\textsuperscript{40} Burke, \textit{Seeking the Highest Good}, 24. Since he enrolled in political economy in his second year, as an undergraduate, King was not in Ashley’s class; Ashley had already moved on to Harvard University. Hardy, \textit{W.L.M.K, A Political Biography}, 42.

\textsuperscript{41} Hardy, \textit{W.L.M.K, A Political Biography}, 29-30.

\textsuperscript{42} Ibid., 29. King enjoyed Mavor’s lectures, noting them on more than one occasion in his diary. In 1894 King cites
in the final year of King’s studies when Mavor made it clear he did not feel King was suited for graduate work. He refused to support King’s application to the University of Toronto Master’s program; he also made every effort to dissuade King from applying to graduate programs at other universities. As a result, King procured a testimonial from George W. Ross, the Ontario Minister of Education, to support his applications. Ross declared him “a diligent, successful, and popular student who has distinguished himself in the Department of Political Economy.”

Though his twenty-two year service as Prime Minister of Canada would make King the most prominent graduate of the class of 1895, there were many others who went on to become influential in the civil service. As undergraduates these men were encouraged to take a “hands-on” approach to social problems, much of which was carried out through the university branch of the Young Men’s Christian Association (YMCA). Formed in 1871, the result of weekly prayer meetings that had been held by a group of undergraduates, the Toronto YMCA was the first student branch in Canada. During its first fifteen years of service, the YMCA’s efforts were devoted to promoting evangelism among the undergraduate students; there was a distinctly evangelistic quality to the YMCA social work. Yet for all of the good intentions, this was a narrow type of social service; the YMCA mandate was to provide spiritual guidance to the lower classes, rather than material forms of aid. However, by the 1880s this student YMCA was

the quality of Mavor’s lecture content as the reason they were the most valuable. W.L. Mackenzie King, Diary, 25 January, 1894.

43 Dawson, W. L.M.K A Political Biography, 42.
44 W.L. Mackenzie King, Diary, 18 February 1896. In the testimonial letter Ross claims that he had “known Mr. King personally for a number of years.” This is a reference to the time that King spent as an employee of the Ontario Ministry of Education during the summer of 1894. It appears that Ross was a friend of King’s father, John, and had offered King a job in the archives. W.L. Mackenzie King Diary, 3 July, 1894. It is not clear whether King actually used this letter; a copy was filed in the pages of his diary between the entries for 18 and 19, February 1896.
45 Burke, Seeking the Highest Good, 27. S.J. McLean, assistant chief commissioner of the Board of Railway Commissioners for Canada and S.A. Cudmore, chief general statistician at the Dominion Bureau of Statistics are just two of the notable men from King’s class.
46 Ibid., 31.
beginning to expand its social work beyond the campus, responding to the “revitalizing Protestantism” that was spreading across Canada. King was attracted to this new Protestantism, drawn to it as a means of achieving social and moral reform. From his diary it is evident that King attended YMCA meetings, even delivering opening prayer on at least one occasion.

Recall that King had been raised in the Presbyterian Church, one of the denominations that sought to expand into urban middle-class districts in order to spread its Christian influence. In the 1890s, church leaders had witnessed what they believed to be the steady deterioration of moral conditions in cities, and believed that improved social conditions would result in a better quality of social and personal life for those living in cities. It was their conviction that the mobilization of the church would lead to greater morality in Canada; the creation of God’s Kingdom on earth would achieve a higher moral character in the people of Canada.

This mobilization of the church was known as the social gospel movement. It was not a uniquely Canadian event, but part of wider movement that also encompassed the United States and Europe. Its goal was to revive Christian social insights and apply them to society. The social gospel rested on the premise that men should find meaning in their lives by “seeking to realize the Kingdom of God in the very fabric of society.” Richard Allen, its primary Canadian historian, acknowledges that, while the Canadian social gospel developed in response to urban

---

47 Burke, *Seeking the Highest Good*, 27-29.
48 W.L. MacKenzie King, *Diary*, 18 January 1894, 19 January, 1894 and 25 January, 1894 are just a few of the diary entries in which King mentions attending YMCA meetings.
49 Fraser, *The Social Uplifters*, 43.
50 Ibid.
domestic and industrial problems, more important than the challenge of these conditions were the currents of thought that were sweeping the Western world in the late nineteenth century. The individuals involved in the social gospel movement initially regarded it as a movement in search of a theology. As it became more prominent early in the twentieth century, the social gospel demanded fuller realization in theological terms. This came about in large part through the writings of American theologian Walter Rauschenbusch.52

Rauschenbusch, whose religious outlook was based on the theology of German scholar Albrecht Ritschl, described the social gospel as “the old message of salvation, but enlarged and intensified.”53 While the old gospel taught Christians how to see sin in the individual heart, it did not give adequate understanding of the sinfulness of society, of the way in which the collective sins of the individual were causing the downfall of the modern conscience.54 King was conscious of his own sinfulness as well as the sins of society.55 His most notorious efforts to lead a Christian life were his attempts to reform Toronto prostitutes, something which will be addressed later in this chapter; however his position as a court reporter for the Globe newspaper also immersed him in the “shadowy side of life.”56 At the end of 1895 King reflected that what he saw in court was “a study in human life, on all its sides” and prayed that God would hasten to make His Kingdom on earth in the year to come.57 This was the essence of Christianity, according to Rauschenbusch. Its essence was not the atonement or the Fatherhood of God and brotherhood of Christ, but rather together these formed the spiritual reality of the Kingdom of

52 Ibid., 6.
54 Ibid., 3.
55 W.L. Mackenzie King, Diary, 31 December, 1896.
56 Dawson, W. L.M.K A Political Biography, 42.
57 W.L. Mackenzie King, Diary, 31 December, 1895.
God. According to Rauschenbusch, the problem with theology was that many ministers had a “dumb-bell” system with the social gospel at one end, individual salvation at the other, and only a flimsy connection between the two. That flimsy connection needed to improve; the strength of faith was in its unity because, according to Rauschenbusch, religion strove for the wholeness of life and theology needed to encompass the social gospel. For those who embraced it, the social gospel would bring joy, power, and expansion of the mind. It even had the ability to take the place of conventional religion in the lives of those who had were outside of the church, who did not consider themselves part of any particular denomination or religious tradition.

The YMCA functioned under the umbrella of Christianity and filtered its social service through an evangelical lens. As a member of the University of Toronto student chapter, this is the YMCA that King experienced. However, when the social gospel movement took hold of Protestantism in Canada, many church leaders saw an opportunity to expand traditional evangelism. According to Richard Allen, when the social gospel initially appeared in Canada between 1890 and 1914, it had three distinct emphases: conservative, progressive and radical. While all three remained united in purpose, each had a different view of society. Conservatives were close to traditional evangelicals, focusing on personal-ethical problems and identifying sin with individual acts. Their social strategy was limited legislative reform of the environment, in such matters as prohibition and Sabbath observance. Radicals, by contrast, saw an organic society that possessed an evil so pervasive that that there could be no personal salvation without social salvation. In the

---

60 Ibid.
61 Burke, *Seeking the Higher Good*, 29.
middle were the progressives who endorsed the platforms of the other two groups, “but transmuting them somewhat in a broad ameliorative programme of reform.”

While King was Presbyterian by denomination, when he moved to Toronto in 1891 he attended an assortment of different Protestant churches and participated in interdenominational organizations. His biographer, R. McGregor Dawson described King’s Christian faith as “intensely vivid and intensely personal” because King felt a “deep concern for individual salvation.” Using Richard Allen’s classifications, this seems to indicate that King would have held a conservative view of society and used the social gospel movement as a vehicle for his own salvation. Indeed, Dawson points out that King was conscious of his inadequacies and sinfulness; there are numerous confessions and regrets recorded in his diary. However, through his studies in Toronto, King developed an interest in the philosophical idealism of Oxford, which regarded Christianity as an ethical way of life. More specifically, King believed that Christian laws governed man and society and that spiritual evolution was possible once man accepted God’s omnipotence. Divine influence would allow man to perfect his nature.

Thus, it could be said that King’s Christianity was based on a belief in the improvement of society through individual and collective effort, guided by the spirit of God. The philosophical idealism of the Department of Political Economy at the University of Toronto allowed King to move toward what Richard Allen would classify as a progressive view of the social gospel’s role in society.

---

63 Cook, The Regenerators, 198.
64 Dawson, W.L.M.K. A Political Biography, 37.
65 Ibid.
66 Cook, The Regenerators, 199.
Above all else in life, King wanted to be influenced by his Christian faith. In 1895, after hearing a speech delivered by Wilfrid Laurier at Massey Hall, King “felt more than inspired,” and though he was still uncertain of whether he should become a minister or politician, King was certain to qualify, “I want to have first a solid Christian basis.” King found his Christian basis in the philosophy of Arnold Toynbee. There is little doubt that King was enthralled by the idealism of Toynbee. He noted the British scholar for the first time in a diary entry from July of 1894: “I read 30 or more [pages]… notes & jottings by Arnold Toynbee. I was simply enraptured by his writing and believe I have at last found a model for my future work in life.” Toynbee’s liberal notion of Christianity was alluring to King and his leftist idealism inspired King to seek the world outside of the university sphere. It was Toynbee’s manliness, his character, his belief in the idealist cause of unity within society that inspired his followers; some even claimed his death was caused by an exhaustive round of lecturing that simply wore him out – he was truly a man in service to all classes. King sought to be a man in the service of all classes; in addition to attending meetings of the YMCA, King spent Sunday afternoons visiting the patients at Sick Children’s Hospital as well as attending numerous sermons and lectures throughout the City of Toronto; he took personal notes and wrote synopses for The Globe newspaper.

King also sought out radicals and working people though activities as varied as attending meetings of the Toronto branch of the Socialist Labor Party (SLP) and taking in the Orange

68 W.L. Mackenzie King, Diary, 5 February 1895.
69 Ibid., 11 July 1894.
70 Burke, Seeking the Highest Good, 14.
71 Unsigned Articles attributed to King in The Globe, various dates 1896, Memoranda and Notes Series J 4, Reel N-19859 NAC. King’s articles in the Globe were unsigned, however through the research of historian George F. Henderson, the articles have been correlated with diary entries and those that can safely be attributed to King are noted in Henderson’s bibliography W.L. Mackenzie King: A Bibliography and Research Guide (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1998)
parade. During the summer of 1895 in particular, King spent many afternoons and evenings discussing socialism with members of the SLP. Established in the United States in 1877, the Socialist Labor Party moved north and, after basing itself in Toronto, it became one of the earliest socialist organizations to appear in Canada.\textsuperscript{72} The primary goal of the SLP was not the seizure of state power, but rather the mobilization of the working class.\textsuperscript{73} In the late nineteenth century, the Liberal party was regarded as the working-class party; it was difficult for the socialists to cultivate leftist politics when the Liberal party platform trumpeted many pro-labour policies.\textsuperscript{74}

While it seems King was not in regular attendance at SLP meetings, a typical diary entry from the summer of 1895 might read: “… tonight I went to the Queen’s Park, had a talk with some Socialists, then listened to the band concert.”\textsuperscript{75} There was an occasion in 1895, when King had the opportunity to address a meeting of the SLP. His topic was “Arnold Toynbee and the Industrial Revolution in England.” With approximately one hundred and fifty present and the marquee outside proclaiming \textit{Mr. King – Addresses Social Reform}, King spoke for over an hour about his interpretation of Arnold Toynbee’s philosophy. He made certain to place emphasis on religion since King believed it was a key component to Toynbee’s work.\textsuperscript{76} King himself had the impression that his address was well received, though two anarchists in the crowd were less receptive to his remarks on religion. King dismissed them easily, commenting “I tried to set them

\textsuperscript{72} Ian McKay, \textit{Reasoning Otherwise: Leftists and the People’s Enlightenment in Canada, 1890-1920} (Toronto: Between the Lines, 2008), 202.
\textsuperscript{73} Gene H. Homel. “James Simpson and the Origins of Canadian Social Democracy” (PhD. diss., University of Toronto, 1970), 204.
\textsuperscript{74} McKay, \textit{Reasoning Otherwise}, 202.
\textsuperscript{75} W.L. Mackenzie King, Diary, 10 July 1895 King’s conversations with Socialists is also mentioned in Dawson, \textit{W.L.M.K A Political Biography}, 46.
\textsuperscript{76} Ibid., 15 December 1895.
right in a reply. They did little harm, mostly to themselves." Given that anarchists were not known for their religious sympathies, it is likely the men at the address did not agree with King’s presentation of the Christian tone of Toynbee’s philosophy.  

Despite his interest in socialism, King was not himself a socialist. As his undergraduate career progressed, King became increasingly devoted to social reform, concerned, as many socialists were, of what would become of society’s poor people. However, there was a sharp divide among the early socialist formations. Debates raged between those who regarded Christ as an exemplary socialist, and those who regarded Christianity as nothing more than a collection of ancient superstitions. According to historian Ian McKay, those who fell between the two extremes were critical of institutional churches, but “sought forms of religious expression that spoke directly to working class struggles.” King was among those who fell between the extremes; while he was not critical of institutional churches, he perceived Christianity as a vehicle of social reform, able to better the lives of the poor and the working class. In 1896, King attended a lecture by the Rev. Canon Du Moulin, the Rector of St. James’ Cathedral in Toronto. In this lecture, the rector praised Christ as a workingman. King later summarized the lecture for readers of the Globe thus:

Honest workingmen, Jesus Christ is like you. He is your brother he knows your troubles and will right them. Professional men, Jesus Christ can share the anxieties that pursue you into the night. He can strengthen you to bear the weight of the brain work which you have.

---

77 W.L. Mackenzie King, Diary, 15 December 1895.
78 At this time, anarchists were advocates of atheism. McKay, Rebels, Reds and Radicals, 155.
79 W.L. Mackenzie King, Diary, 29 September, 1894.
80 McKay, Rebels, Reds and Radicals, 154.
81 Unsigned Articles attributed to King in The Globe, 19 March, 1896, Memoranda and Notes Series J 4, Reel N 19859
King believed that God, through His son Jesus Christ, was a partner in life. God’s plan for King required him to walk in his grandfather Mackenzie’s footsteps. In the words of Dawson, it was Mackenzie’s “natural sympathy for the unfortunate, his passion for freedom and justice... and his furious resentment at the selfishness and intransigence of the ruling group”\(^\text{82}\) that had prompted his leadership of the 1837 rebellion; above all, King’s grandfather had supported democracy over privilege, and so did his grandson.\(^\text{83}\) In 1897, after a talk with Arnot Hepburn, the Toronto leader of the Socialist Labour Party, King angrily recorded in his diary, “I think Hepburn a poor leader stubborn & arrogant. I find less & less to admire in the rich, their selfishness of manner & thought. I feel driven to Democracy… in it there is most truth.”\(^\text{84}\)

King would have also felt driven to democracy by his intellectual model of Arnold Toynbee. Setting a Christian lens on society and using Toynbee as a base, King believed in a system of government that imposed rules and regulations that would allow equality between classes. It was Toynbee who felt that democracy contributed to the solution of problems caused by industrial change. Toynbee had great faith in law as an equalizer, more specifically, laws made through democracy, since presumably, all people would have the opportunity to elect the officials who made the laws. The problem in industrial society was that workers were isolated, dependent on their employers for their livelihood. Democracy made an equal union possible through legislation.\(^\text{85}\) The rights of the individual would clash, according to Toynbee, but would be

\(^{82}\) Dawson, *W.L.M. King, A Political Biography*, 4.

\(^{83}\) Ibid.

\(^{84}\) W.L. Mackenzie King, Diary, 5 September 1897.

\(^{85}\) Toynbee, *Lectures on The Industrial Revolution*, 200.
reconciled through “a higher gospel than the gospel of rights – the gospel of duty.”\textsuperscript{86} Democracy made certain reconciliation was possible.

King’s first encounter with Toynbee had come at a time when he had already begun to translate his desire for personal salvation into his desire to help the unfortunate in Toronto, more specifically, the “fallen women” who made the city their home.\textsuperscript{87} Since King’s increased social consciousness was inspired by Toynbee, his well-documented encounters with prostitutes in Toronto should be reevaluated. Toynbee felt that useful work with the underprivileged had to go beyond economic relief; it had to include education, religious belief and a desire for self-improvement in order to restore the dignity and well-being of the poor.\textsuperscript{88} King also hoped to restore dignity to the poor, thus putting his Christian ideals into practice and helping the helpless of Toronto. This led him to some of the seedier areas of the city.\textsuperscript{89} Historian C.P. Stacey has famously suggested that the walks that King took in the streets of Toronto were for the sole purpose of visiting and soliciting the services of prostitutes; King did speak with prostitutes. This cannot be disputed. However, when King encountered prostitutes, there is no evidence that he solicited their services. Instead, his diary shows that he was fortified by the knowledge that if these women were to accept the love of Christ into their hearts, they would be able to leave their sinful lives.\textsuperscript{90}

\begin{thebibliography}{99}
\bibitem{86} Ibid., 200.
\bibitem{87} Dawson, \textit{W.L.M.K. A Political Biography}, 46.
\bibitem{88} Arnold Toynbee, \textit{Lectures on The Industrial Revolution of the 18\textsuperscript{th} Century England, Popular Addresses, Notes and Other Fragments} (New York: The Humboldt Publishing Co., 1884), 256.
\bibitem{89} W.L. Mackenzie King, Diary, 1 January 1894.
\bibitem{90} Ibid., 5 October 1894.
\end{thebibliography}
In October of 1894 two women named Jennie and Edna figure prominently in King’s diary entries. King and a friend, whose name is not mentioned, happened upon the two girls working on King Street in Toronto, “…we went out with two girls who live on King St. and down to their rooms we were here till nearly 2AM. I got pretty well the history of the girls [sic] lives.”91 Following this initial meeting King sought out the women and on another occasion “…tried to point out the love of the Saviour to them,” and spoke for four hours on the topic. King observed “they do feel an awful consciousness of their sin and yet feel it holds them very fast.”92 After several more visits King realized that it was Edna who was more likely to leave her life of prostitution; she wanted to return to her job as a nurse.

King determined the best course of action was to procure a bed for Edna in a Toronto shelter.93 During the late 1800s, shelters had been established in Toronto in order to contend with increasing social problems that had resulted from rapid expansion within the city. The Haven was one such shelter. Initially intended as a place for women recently released from prison, soon after it opened in 1878 its mandate was expanded; need and gender became the sole requirements. The Haven not only provided shelter for women, but also emotional support, counseling, and employment training to anyone who desired it. In the 1890’s many of the women who could be found in one of The Haven’s seventy-three beds were mothers and their children, unmarried expectant mothers, inmates, “drunkards”, the elderly and prostitutes. Admissions were either self-referrals or came from clergy, friends, family and other charities.94 King spoke

91 Ibid., 2 October 1894.
92 Ibid., 5 October 1894.
93 Ibid., 20 October 1894.
with the president of The Haven’s administrative committee Elizabeth J. Harvie, securing a place at The Haven for Edna.  

…after much talking, she [Edna] consented [to give up her bad life]… by 8 o’clock we took a car for ‘the Haven’. When here she broke down completely, asked for forgiveness. I felt sorry to leave Jennie behind yet was rejoiced at bringing this tossed about little ship into a quiet harbour.

Whether or not King went back to The Haven to check on Edna’s progress is difficult to determine; she is not mentioned in the diary after this entry. However, King fervently hoped to “attain the highest & work unselfishly for my fellow man thro’ a love for Christ,” and based on the diary entries of October 1894 regarding Jennie and Edna, it would seem that he was able to attain this goal at least once while he lived in Toronto.

Evidence of King’s alleged solicitation of prostitutes was, in C.P. Stacey’s estimation, proven by the imprecise and repetitive references to “wasted time” that King made in his diary. Stacey argues the repetitive nature of these diary passages were a manifestation of King’s guilt and thus confirmation of his true intentions; “the precise nature of these sins he does not tell us. But it can hardly be doubted that these ‘strolls’ were visits to prostitutes.” Stacey likens “sin” with lust. However, based on the moral standards to which King held himself, there is little evidence that “wasted time” can be equated with lust and the solicitation of prostitutes. Stacey’s theory is contrary to King’s attempts to be a proper gentleman. Certainly by many accounts, King was not a man who would have indulged in the services of prostitutes; H.L. Staebler, a childhood friend,

95 Ibid., 287. Harvie was associated with The Haven from its inception until her death in 1929. She was also well known in the city for her work with the foreign Presbyterian Mission, the Ontario Women’s Christian Temperance Union, and Women’s Medical College.
96 W.L. Mackenzie King, Diary, 20 October 1894.
97 Ibid., 6 December 1895.
98 Stacey, A Very Double Life, 42.
recalled that when “Billy King [went to university, his] outlook experienced a great change. Religiously, he had a more serious attitude toward life”99 According to A.L. Breithaupt, another friend from Berlin who also lived with King during his first year at the University of Toronto, King never smoked or drank, though he seemed to not pay heed if others did. Breithaupt also recalled that King “always had such perfect control of his mind… he never got angry.”100

Stacey’s theory also overlooks the reason King undertook his role as a diarist: to facilitate self-improvement. As a Christian, in order to nurture a pure character, King would have confronted six additional sins besides lust. Therefore, when King is referring to “sin” in his diary, he might have been referring to any one of pride, sloth, anger, gluttony, greed, or envy.101 In fact, there is evidence that King was referring to the sin of sloth. While he may have made habitual mention of wasted time King also habitually chronicled what he did each day.102 In keeping with the intention of his diary and not allowing a day to pass without something to show for it, he would account for the lectures and club meetings he attended, the time he devoted to studying, books he was reading, people he met and spoke with during the day, conversations with professors, letters he was writing and even the extra time he devoted to reviewing his course notes. King would congratulate himself on his efficient use of time; in 1894 he recalled his monthly activities and proudly declared, “The month is now ended and looking back on it I can feel that it has not been wasted. Much college work has been covered and a little work has been done for the Masters.[sic]”103 He would also admonish himself for spending too much time socializing, “this week is not what it ought to have been. I must end this going out & settle down to hard work &

99 H.L. Staebler, as quoted in The Kitchener-Waterloo Record, 24 July 1950.
100 A.L. Breithaupt, as quoted in The Hamilton Spectator, 5 July 1948.
101 Esber, Knight of the Holy Spirit, 3.
102 W.L. Mackenzie King, Diary, 6 September, 1893.
103 Ibid., 31 January 1894.
thought, get out my books … think more seriously of life and its call to work.”

It is evident that King’s devotion to the Christian faith and piety manifested itself in his desire to improve the lives of others, but he also appeared to embrace the philosophy of living every moment to the fullest. On the first day of the New Year, 1894, King looked ahead and listed twelve traits that he hoped to maintain in the year to come. He included in his list doing all he could to help others, in particular the poor and sick, allowing his life to “bear witness to Christ,” being “honest and upright” in all things, and “Do not waste any time. ‘Be up and Doing.’”

As the end of King’s undergraduate career approached in 1895 his father John encouraged him to pursue a career in law. In a letter to his friend Bert Harper, King admitted that he was taking a legal reading course only to convince his father that he had given law full consideration before pursuing post graduate work in social economics. King wrote the necessary examinations and was awarded an L.L.B in 1896. He immediately applied for a fellowship with the University of Chicago to pursue studies in social economics. In Chicago, King felt that he would be able to attain higher planes of thought and action through participation in settlement work outside of his usual coursework.

Settlement work or “settlement movement” refers to the efforts undertaken by university students in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries to respond to social problems in urban areas. The North American settlement movement found its origins in Britain at Oxford University

---

104 Ibid, 16 February 1901.
105 W.L. Mackenzie King, Diary, 1 January 1894.
106 __________, Correspondence, 24 July 1895.
107 __________, Diary, 1 January 1894.
where the first settlement, Toynbee Hall, was built in 1884.\textsuperscript{108} Named after Arnold Toynbee and committed to his ideal of elevating the working class, Toynbee Hall was built by Samuel Barnett in a working class area of England. It was thought that middle-class men living among the working class would help to bridge the class divide.\textsuperscript{109} The settlement movement depended on the dedication of these educated, middle-class men, who by virtue of their class and gender would go on to occupy key positions in public service.\textsuperscript{110} King was attracted to the settlement movement because of his desire to realize a life of service; he viewed it as a way to live life more fully.\textsuperscript{111} For King, the University of Chicago was appealing because of its academic reputation and the city was appealing because it was home to a pioneer of the American settlement movement and founder of Hull House, Jane Addams.\textsuperscript{112}

In the fall of 1896, King arrived in Chicago and promptly visited Hull House. Jane Addams and Ellen Gates Starr had opened this settlement house in Chicago’s impoverished nineteenth ward in 1889. The role Adams and Starr played in the American settlement movement was remarkable given that it was a movement which typically excluded women. Since Oxford University and Toynbee Hall provided the model for the settlement movement in North America (and while settlement directors on this side of the Atlantic did not enact the policy that deliberately excluded women) social work was perceived as a male responsibility. The social work carried out by women was largely ignored.\textsuperscript{113} According to Sara Burke, when the University of Toronto settlement opened, it sought to provide university men with the experiences of urban slum

\textsuperscript{108} Burke, \textit{Seeking the Highest Good}, 4-5.
\textsuperscript{110} Burke, \textit{Seeking the Highest Good}, 13.
\textsuperscript{111} W.L. Mackenzie King, Diary, 31 December 1896.
\textsuperscript{112} Burke, \textit{Seeking the Highest Good}, 36.
\textsuperscript{113} Ibid., 59-60.
conditions, and “initially only men were accepted as resident workers or volunteers.”

When King arrived in Chicago in 1896, the American settlement movement was expanding rapidly and Jane Addams had emerged as a leader. Increasingly, university women were attracted to residential life in the settlements; it provided independence and an opportunity to contribute to the community.

After receiving a tour from Addams herself, King became a resident at Hull House, happy to follow the example of Toynbee and live among the poor. He came to Hull House at a time when approximately two thousand people were helped by its services each week. Services included a nursery, kindergarten class, library, and clubs for all ages. While King admired the work Addams and her staff did, he soon began to question his decision to live at the residence. King was not certain he was making a significant contribution to the settlement; he conducted club meetings, often speaking himself, but only a small amount of his time was devoted to visiting the slums. Not only was the two hour journey between the settlement and university taxing, but as he explained in his diary,

I have to consider my life usefulness & at present the university seems to be my field of work. I had hoped to combine both, but I find I cannot and the work I accomplish here for the neighbourhood is not worth the sacrifice, at least it does not appear so.

On New Year’s Eve 1896 King remained uncertain of his vocation. He was optimistic though, and felt that in the year to come, he would be able to choose one of the “three worthy ambitions” that were spread before him: “a leading position in political life – life of the state – a leading

---

114 Ibid., 60.
115 Ibid., 44. The American movement underwent a rapid period of growth, with only six settlements in 1891 growing to over one hundred by the turn of the century.
117 Ibid., 59.
118 W.L. Mackenzie King, Diary, 31 December 1896
position in University life – and a leading position in the Church.”

119 King prayed to God, asking that He would direct him in service of His cause; “and with this prayer, that if any of these or other causes may take me away from Him, that my life may be blighted…”

120 In January of 1897, King left Hull House and took up residence closer to the university. He continued his research in Chicago, though following his disappointing settlement experience at Hull House he felt no need to remain in the city, and began to cast about for fellowship opportunities at other universities. King continued his graduate research in 1898, finding one such opportunity at Harvard University.

It was as a graduate student first in Chicago, but in particular at Harvard, that King encountered both the writings of Henry Drummond and Herbert Spencer. It was the latter’s theory of social evolution that prompted King to declare his wholehearted belief in the science of evolution, in particular the way in which Spencer applied it to the concept of social change. Herbert Spencer was a sociologist, philosopher and early advocate of the theory of evolution. King read Spencer’s most accessible work, *Principles of Sociology* in 1898.

121 In this publication, Spencer explains that the benefits of social life arise from the principle of cooperation, that is, the different duties being undertaken by different elements of society. Cooperation can be both voluntary and involuntary, the former resulting with no conscious decision, and the latter resulting from organization that is established by government. The existence of organization is valuable for maintaining order in a community, but according to Spencer, it also constitutes an obstacle in the way of progress or change. He goes on to explain that the growth of a society is dependent on a

---

119 Ibid., 21 December, 1896.
120 Ibid.
121 Ibid., 29 October 1898.
number of factors, one of those being the homogeneity of the component parts of the society. Using the analogy of how a mammal’s body functions, Spencer explains that if one part fails, all of the rest of the body’s systems will fail as well. He likens the interconnectedness of a mammal’s body to a society,

…we see that the workers in iron stop if the miners do not supply materials; that makers of clothes cannot carry on their business in the absence of those who spin and weave textile fabrics; that the manufacturing community will cease to act unless the food-producing and food-distributing agencies are acting; that the controlling powers, governments, bureaus, judicial officers, police, must fail to keep order when the necessaries of life are not supplied to them by the parts kept in order.

Spencer believed the interdependence of industrial and social institutions was inevitable as they continued to evolved, and that complexities were formed without conscious decision. Social evolution would occur gradually over time, and setbacks should be expected. However, progress would lead to the attainment of perfect freedom as human nature itself became more perfect. In his work *Social Statics*, Spencer describes the ultimate man thus: “...he must become impressed with the salutary truth, that no one can be perfectly free till all are free; no one can be perfectly moral till all are moral; no one can be perfectly happy till all are happy.” Spencer’s appeal to King would have been rooted in the way he echoed the idealism of Toynbee. Human society was interconnected, and the only way humanity could achieve perfection was in the mutual aid of each other; “the doctrine of evolution makes man one with the universe,” King mused in his diary. This faith in evolution would later allow King to incorporate spiritualist

---

123 Herbert Spencer, *The Principles of Sociology, Volume 2* (New York: D Appleton, 1897), 452-453. This analogy is not perfect; Spencer himself acknowledged that parts of an organism are in direct contact, while members of a society are not. However, he believed this could be overcome through effective communication.
124 Elliot, *Herbert Spencer*, 177, 180.
126 W.L.Mackenzie King, *Diary*, 12 November 1898.
beliefs into his worldview with greater ease; spiritualists believed the advent of spirit communication signaled a new era in which spirits would guide humans in their evolution toward a higher level of social consciousness.\textsuperscript{127}

Unlike those Christians for whom the most threatening science to emerge in the late nineteenth century was the theory of evolution, by King’s estimation, because spiritual law was applicable to the natural world, “any intelligent man must accept the doctrine of evolution.”\textsuperscript{128} King’s ideas about spiritual law were influenced by Henry Drummond’s book \textit{Natural Law in the Spiritual World}, which he read in 1899. Henry Drummond had studied theology at New College in Edinburgh and later became a Professor of Natural Science at the Free Church College in Glasgow.\textsuperscript{129} Though a trained member of the clergy, Drummond preferred to present himself as a scientist, claiming there was a fundamental continuity between the natural and spiritual worlds.\textsuperscript{130} Drummond argued that not only were the spiritual and material worlds governed by God, but physical laws also apply in both realms. Evolution, according to Drummond, provided an improved understanding of the Bible. Religious truths as recorded in the Bible grew through natural processes to reveal a higher expression of them.\textsuperscript{131} In \textit{Natural Law}, Drummond stated that “the purification of Religion comes from Science… [and]… the purification of Science, in a deeper sense, shall come from Religion.”\textsuperscript{132} An important component of Drummond’s theology was the link that it provided between individuals and society; the environments in which humans found themselves were a key factor in shaping human spiritual growth. Drummond believed in

\textsuperscript{127} McMillian, \textit{Anatomy of a Séance}, 59.
\textsuperscript{128} W.L. Mackenzie King, Diary, 17 May 1899.
\textsuperscript{129} Fraser, \textit{The Social Uplifters}, 13.
\textsuperscript{131} Fraser, \textit{The Social Uplifters}, 16
\textsuperscript{132} Henry Drummond, \textit{Natural Law and the Spiritual World} (New York: James Pott, 1884), 31.
individual self-sacrifice as the way to achieve spiritual progress. Given King’s Christian faith, he found Drummond summarized his views precisely: “I find in it that which satisfies me and confirms my convictions. I have been groping my way in this direction for some time in the past, for some years in fact.” King identified with Drummond’s message, saying in his diary that Drummond provided “some solid thought” and that the subject of evolution afforded a larger vision of the world that was “stimulating to the imagination, appeal[ing] to reason, and uplift[ing] to] the soul.”

Sociologist Lester Ward’s publication Outlines of Sociology also played a part in King’s understanding of the progression of society. According to Ward, if the tenets of evolution were applied to society, then science would reinforce Christian belief, “The reformat’n [sic] in religion… will be its establishment on a scientific basis- its greatest advance. The inevitability of law in the spiritual as in the material world will be shown.” For King, social evolution’s belief in human progression toward a higher level of consciousness provided a key to understanding society and religion; man and society were governed by Christian laws of evolution. If men were aware of this process, they could strive to improve themselves, and thus society as a whole.

As an undergraduate student, King had not appeared to ally himself with any particular political party, but while he was a graduate student, King renewed his interest in socialism, an interest that had begun several years earlier during summer evening conversations with the SLP in Toronto. King had already read Marx but did not care for his work, finding it far too abstract to

---

133 Ibid., 143, 144.  
134 W.L.Mackenzie King Diary, 15 January 1899.  
135 Ibid., 14 January 1902.  
136 Ibid., 1 October 1898.  
137 Cook, The Regenerators, 199.
be convincing. However, upon reading a pamphlet by Engels, King remarked in his diary, “there is something about socialism that interests me deeply. There is truth in it – it is full of truth, yet much that is strange and obscure.”

“Socialism: Utopian and Scientific” was the pamphlet that held both truth and obscurity. A compilation of selections from *Anti Dühring*, this pamphlet was translated into many languages and, with the exception of the *Communist Manifesto* itself, became one of the most popular Socialist works. In section two, “Dialectics”, Engels contrasts what he labels old materialism with new materialism. Whereas old materialism “looked upon all previous history as a crude heap of irrationality and violence” the new materialism regarded history as the evolution of humanity and aimed to discover the laws that governed humanity. To that end, Engels believed that dialectical reasoning was advanced by the modern discoveries of natural science. When the sciences clarified their purpose in the body of human knowledge, science itself became unnecessary and “that which still survives of all earlier philosophy is the science of thought and its law — formal logic and dialectics.”

King had already declared his strong faith in the theory of evolution of humanity, and so Engels’ thoughts regarding human evolution would have appealed to King’s way of thinking. In particular, King appreciated the role that science played in social evolutionary theory. While he was not as familiar with biology as he wished to be, King felt he should “study science &

---

138 W.L. Mackenzie King Diary, 26 May 1897.
139 Ibid., 13 August 1897.
141 Ibid., 77.
especially evolution carefully. Science will reveal God as nothing else could.”¹⁴² Engels also emphasized the role that modern science would play in enhancing human knowledge, though he did not believe science would reveal God. However, Engels did perceive an ideological role for science in society; socialism was a science that could explain society. Socialism was not the by-product of a brilliant mind, but rather “the necessary outcome of the struggle between two historically developed classes — the proletariat and the bourgeoisie.”¹⁴³ Socialism was able to examine the historic and economic succession of events that paved the way for the antagonism between classes. It must be noted that Henry Drummond believed evolution, which he defined as a science, would lead to greater understanding of the Bible, an expression of humanity. King might have been referring to elements of both Engels and Drummond when he said “We [humanity] will have a great religious awakening someday & sciences will proclaim the gospel of Christ.”¹⁴⁴

The works of Engels and Spencer, the prevalence of social Christianity, and a rapidly growing city of Toronto were all elements that combined to influence King’s worldview, but how was he able to synthesize these ideas? In his 1897 diary King declared, “I feel my ideal is to better the lot of unfortunate humanity & one plan is to study & write of them, a history of the working classes seems a good subject.”¹⁴⁵ That is exactly the project King began when he finished his graduate studies and received his PhD in 1909. In 1911, King was offered a position as Director of Industrial Research with the Rockefeller Foundation in the United States. King’s original assignment was to travel and produce a study of industrial relations throughout the world, but the

¹⁴² W.L.Mackenzie King Diary, 29 October 1898.
¹⁴⁴ W.L.Mackenzie King Diary, 29 October 1898.
¹⁴⁵ Ibid., 5 September 1897.
war altered these plans. When a large number of factories producing munitions for the war effort found themselves facing shutdown due to labour difficulties, instead of basing his study on global industrial relations, King’s publication, *Industry and Humanity: A Study in the Principles Underlying Industrial Reconstruction* examined “the results of his experiences in the United States and set forth his principal social ideas.” King proposed that in industry, besides the three accepted components of labour, capital, and management, community was also an element that must be considered. Community provided the environment in which the other elements functioned; all four components were interdependent. Problems occurred when any one of these elements set out to dominate the other. Once it was published, *Industry and Humanity*, the end result of King’s work with the Rockefeller Foundation, did not meet with sweeping critical or commercial success. King’s official biographer R. McGregor Dawson attributes this lack of interest to King’s tendency to focus primarily on abstract moral concepts. However, *Industry and Humanity* is significant in that it encapsulated King’s vision not only of industrial democracy, but also his thoughts regarding materialism and his sense of moral Christianity.

Overwhelmingly, King’s faith is prominent throughout *Industry and Humanity*. Indeed, for King it was virtually impossible to separate religion and life:

Mankind cannot serve two masters. The human spirit will rise supreme over material considerations, or material aims will destroy the human spirit. Until one is subservient to the other, conflict will never cease. Material force may conquer material force, but where

---

147 Hardy, *Mackenzie King of Canada*, 69 and 72.
there is conflict between the material and the spiritual, because God-like in his nature, man will never rest until spirit is supreme.\textsuperscript{150}

The underlying message of \textit{Industry and Humanity} indicates King's faith in capitalism, but in a capitalist society in which individualism is a component of group organization within economic and political systems.\textsuperscript{151} The overarching influence of Christianity and the social Christian emphasis on the evolution of mankind are evident in King's conception of industrial relations. He perceived a battle between fear and faith being fought in industrial affairs, where faith was the basis for Christianity and heathenism was the basis for fear. Every man battles fear and faith within his soul, and both fear and faith have the ability to affect work, fear sapping energy and faith promoting vitality.\textsuperscript{152} Christianity was the key for King; it would eliminate fear by providing freedom. Indeed, King believed that a spiritual outlook would have to precede the understanding of economic and social problems because “the Christian ideal of human existence is the highest, since it endows man not with rational qualities alone, but also with an immortal nature.” \textsuperscript{153}

In his notes and jottings Arnold Toynbee perceived humanity as “huddled together on our little earth” gazing, “with frightened eyes into the dark universe.”\textsuperscript{154} These words also aptly describe a young King’s efforts to make sense of a world that, at times, seemed laced with darkness. Christianity would provide the light, and any effort that King made to incorporate aspects of the external factors that he encountered had to fit into his existing self-image as a Christian man.

\textsuperscript{150} Burke, \textit{Seeking the Highest Good}, 84.
\textsuperscript{152} Ibid., 233.
\textsuperscript{153} Ibid., 83.
\textsuperscript{154} Toynbee, \textit{Lectures on the Industrial Revolution}, 256.
King was confident that an infusion of a new spirit in industry would come, but only “through a belief in some order with which all things should accord, and through the application of principles founded on this belief.”

King’s view of industrial democracy and his philosophy of working relationships clearly reveal the impact idealism and political economy had on his world view. Like the new economists of the time, King believed that citizenship and a sense of community among classes could lead to a better society. Toynbee’s influence on King’s thoughts is also evident. It was Toynbee who believed community was an essential component of the industrial system; failed communities were the result of weakening relationships between workmen and employers. Industrialization lessened the need for any contact between the employer and employee; “there was often great brutality and gross vice… the workman was at his employer’s mercy” Toynbee said, attributing the further decline of this relationship to the advent of the industrial age. King himself advocated that employers, employees, working men, and officials should remain in close contact, meeting frequently so they could know and trust each other. King saw the role of the employer as that of a unifier, a way to avoid injustices and misunderstandings. This would foster an understanding of each other’s concerns and points of view so that when problems arise, there is ability to conference and the possibility of friction is significantly lessened. It was the state which had the ability to promote a sense of unity among all classes.

156 Burke, *Seeking the Highest Good*, 19.
158 King, *Industry and Humanity*, 204. King put this theory into practice when he was called upon to settle the Colorado Fuel and Iron Company strike in 1915. The first action that he took was to enlist the cooperation of John D. Rockefeller Jr., the owner of the company, and encourage him to speak with the miners themselves. Touring the
While advocating state intervention in economy may appear to be a socialist ideal, as was stated previously, King was not a socialist because socialism did not, universally, incorporate Christian beliefs. In February of 1900, King recorded his thoughts on the relationship between Christianity and labour in his diary, stating that socialism sought to change only external conditions, and Christianity sought to change the heart of humanity. The marriage of the two, King thought, was the only way to achieve a permanent good in society.”  

King might have advocated state control and regulation of industry as a necessity, but only because it was a way to protect society from the ignorance, thoughtlessness, indifference and greed of the non-Christian individual. For King, Christianity had the ability not only to promote agency among the working class, but also could help humanity overcome its preoccupation with materialism.

King defined materialism not simply as the world of money, technology, and progress that had caused social ills in urban areas, but also as the primal passions that comprised human nature. These passions were the natural, “pagan” side of humanity, a materialism that had to be overcome in order to experience the spiritual, where the spiritual was the genius, intellectual, and the serene. “What is it we wish to survive? Is it Matter or Spirit?” King poses this question to mines, King and Rockefeller spoke with the men and their labour leaders, and it was this action that laid the basis for negotiation. A settlement was soon reached. Hardy, *Mackenzie King of Canada*, 69

159 Burke, *Seeking the Highest Good*, 19.
160 W.L. Mackenzie King, Diary, July 1899. While King had referred to his opinion of socialism on several occasions, this entry is the most detailed explanation of why he did not support socialism. A pertinent excerpt from the entry explains, “I am coming to believe, that merely to aid in agitation, say of a Socialist sort among masses, helps only make them discontented while no positive result for good can ensue… under a regime of social[ism] the secret of the present indust’l greatness wd. be taken away…”
161 W.L. Mackenzie King, Diary, 22 February 1900. Indeed, after reading the biography of Robert Burns, King reflected that if Burns had been more spiritual, he might have overcome problems in his life, “one feels it was a great struggle & in many ways a great failure, where a little spiritual help of the right kind might have lifted him to any heights. 31 January 1931
162 King, *Industry and Humanity*, 351.
163 W.L. Mackenzie King, Diary, 30 January 1931.
readers of *Industry and Humanity*, indicating that “the two are entirely different;” if matter and spirit were the same, there would be no difference between the living and dead. King believed that if the human race was to choose matter, then people, for the sake of material gain, would have to override any moral sensibilities they possessed. This in turn would result in brutal and ruthless competition without regard for human life, and in the end, material loss would still occur. Matter, King observed,

...knows nothing of aspiration and despair, of love and hate, of faith and fear. Yet these are the chords of human sensibilities upon which all the joy, all the passion, and all the pathos of human life are expressed. The materialistic interpretation of life has... brought only death and desolation in colossal measure.

But, if humanity were to choose the spiritual, then it could reconstruct a broken world. This could only be achieved through mutual service in accordance with a higher law, a law which finds expression in Christian love and sacrifice. King called this the *Law of Christian Service*. This rejection of materialism foreshadows King’s later interest in spiritualism and will be discussed in more detail in chapter three.

King’s religious faith as a young man in Toronto during the late 1890s was indicative of the beliefs held by socially-minded Christians of that time; there was a belief that crime, poverty, and general suffering would be abolished if a Kingdom of God could be established on Earth.

It was the slums of Toronto that inspired King’s social Christianity and prompted him to choose

---

164 King, *Industry and Humanity*, 122. Use of the term “Matter” refers to material wealth that humans strive to control, most often through industry.
165 Ibid., 125
166 Ibid., 122.
167 Ibid., 124-125.
168 Ibid., 125.
169 Cook, *The Regenerators*, 8
a vocation that would allow him to carry out God’s work. King believed that whatever path he
walked his ultimate goal would be the same: putting his Christian ideals into practice, “I feel my
ideal is to better the lot of unfortunate humanity... How earnestly I prayed in church, to be of
service to the world.” This faith inspired not only his entry into public service, but also his
later move toward spiritualism, as will now be examined in the final chapter.

\[170\]

W.L. Mackenzie King Diary, 5 September 1897.
CHAPTER 3
A Most Remarkable Experience: a continued quest into the spiritual

This final chapter examines how King came to embrace spiritualism later in his life. Rather than simply attributing his interest in spiritualism and his pursuit of psychical research to the loneliness of a man who devoted his life to public office and had lost his family at an early age, these events are treated as a catalyst. Spiritualism is examined as a lived religion that King adopted into his life in an effort to explore links between the material and spiritual worlds, links that would facilitate not only his own personal evolution, but the evolution of mankind.

At the turn of the century, King was a young man in limbo. He was torn between an ambitious desire to achieve notoriety either as a politician or university professor, and an altruistic inclination to help the poor and the working class, either through social work or as a member of the clergy.¹ In King’s mind, only one thing was certain: achieving a moral, spiritual life would not only lead to personal betterment and the betterment of society, but would also facilitate the evolution of humanity. For King, evolution could not be separated from immortality. In his 1898 diary, King noted that “all evolution points to immortality, creation alone finds completeness only in immortal life and perfection;”² eventually, as humanity evolved, the material world would be of little consequence.

As suggested in the previous chapter, it was King’s rejection of materialism and his strong support of the theory of evolution which laid the groundwork for his later interest in spiritualism.

¹ Hardy, W.L.M.K, A Political Biography, 57.
² W.L. Mackenzie King, Diary, 12 November 1898.
It is this interest in spiritualism that has coloured the way history remembers Canada’s former Prime Minister, as the gullible victim of a pseudo-religious movement that was nothing more than the fanciful pastime of the upper middle class.\(^3\) This chapter will focus on spiritualism not as a fanciful pastime or bizarre pseudo-religious movement, but rather on spiritualism as a religion, whose roots lay in the progressive Christianity of the late nineteenth century. Historian Robert Orsi has observed that religion only comes into existence through the dynamic relationships that it forms with the realities of everyday life. For this reason the daily tasks of the people who practice a religion must be considered.\(^4\) To that end, in this chapter spiritualism will be placed within the context of the time in which it developed and will be examined according to the theory of *lived religion*; not as a theologically constructed religion, but a religion of lay men and women who developed and practiced beliefs that were relevant at that time.\(^5\)

The previous chapter delves into King’s religious views while he was a university student, leaving him in the early 1900s as he was establishing his career in Ottawa. Chapter three finds King in the 1920s and 1930s, middle-aged and an established politician. King’s political career is well-known and will not be elaborated upon here.\(^6\) However, it must be noted that King maintained his Presbyterian faith throughout his adult life. A member of St. Andrews Church in

---

\(^3\) George Bowering, *Egotists and Autocrats, The Prime Ministers of Canada.* (Canada: Penguin Books, 1999), 206; Gray, “Crazy Like a Fox” *Saturday Night* October 1997, 44; Stacey, *A Very Double Life*, 10. The aforementioned sources are only a few of those which cast doubt onto King’s character based on his interest in spiritualism.


\(^6\) Briefly, King spent the early 1900s as the Deputy Minister of Labour for Canada’s new Federal Department of Labour. Hardy, *Mackenzie King of Canada*, 72. After winning the seat in the North Waterloo riding in 1909, he assumed his first official cabinet position as Canada’s first Minister of Labour for Laurier’s Liberal government, but King lost his seat during the 1911 election. He accepted employment with the Rockefellers in the United States, while maintaining political ambitions in Canada. Hardy, *Mackenzie King of Canada* 286-287. He returned to Canada in 1919; later that year King became the Liberal party leader and in 1921, the Prime Minister of Canada. Bowering, *Egotists and Autocrats*, 218.
Ottawa and Toronto, according to biographer H. Reginald Hardy, King read the Bible every day, always taking a moment to study and reflect upon passages as a way to refresh his mind.\(^7\) Besides personal expressions of faith at home and through church, in 1924, when the Church Union movement came to Parliament requesting legislation that would allow for the union of the Methodist, Congregational and Presbyterian Churches of Canada, King became acutely aware of his role as a Presbyterian layman.\(^8\) The parliamentary debate concerning the allocation of assets to the two disagreeing Presbyterian factions highlighted questions regarding the boundaries between church and state; many Members of Parliament chose to debate “in accordance with their Christian beliefs and denominational affiliations,” in an issue that, at least in part, notes historian Ross Fair, “involved questions of religious orthodoxy.”\(^9\) Evaluating advice both from the Reverend Thomas Eakin, a professor of Pastoral Theology at the Presbyterian College in Montreal, as well as the Chief Justice of Ontario, Sir William Mulock, King proposed an amendment to Bill 47 that distanced the role of the Federal government from national church affairs.\(^10\) King’s ability to separate his public persona and private life was a skill that served him well as a politician. As will be discussed later in this chapter, when King began his own explorations of spiritualism and psychic research, he was acutely aware of the importance of a separation between his public role as Prime Minister and his personal faith.

\(^{7}\) Hardy, Mackenzie King of Canada, 158.
\(^{8}\) Ross D. Fair, “‘Fraught with all sorts of dangers:’ Church, State, Politics and the United Church of Canada Act 1924,” *Journal of the Canadian Historical Association* 14 (2003): 215. The Church Union Movement refers to the creation of the United Church of Canada. In 1924, “unionists” sought to create one church comprised of the Methodist, Congregationalist and Presbyterian Protestant denominations. While Methodists and Congregationalists were in favour of the plan, a significant minority of Presbyterians wished to see the Presbyterian Church remain a separate entity.
\(^{9}\) Ibid., 196.
\(^{10}\) Ibid., 216. Eakin advised King to move Bill 47 through Parliament quickly so that the church could avoid years of litigation and Constitutional debate. As a member of the Presbyterian Church Association, Eakin was not without bias. Mulock simply indicated that King should consider the political future of his party and avoid any appearance of taking sides in the issue.
Another skill that not only served King well as a politician, but also allowed him to advance quickly was his penchant for cultivating acquaintances with influential people who might be of use to him.\footnote{Hardy, \textit{Mackenzie King of Canada}, 171.} To that end, it was King’s association, as both protégé and personal friend, with Sir Wilfrid Laurier that secured him introductions to important contacts. Indeed, King himself credited his close relations with Laurier as one of the key factors that secured the advancement of his career.\footnote{Ibid., 173.} One such introduction was in the early 1900s to George and Mary Fulford. The importance of these particular acquaintances proved not to be political advancement, but rather advancement of the spiritual kind.\footnote{Library and Archives Canada “Mary Fulford (1856-1946)” Behind the Diary, http://www.collectionscanada.gc.ca/king/05320113/053201130418_e.html} A successful businessman, George Fulford had amassed his wealth as the owner of a pharmaceutical business. His patented “Dr. William’s Pink Pills for Pale People” promised to cure cholera, “all forms of weakness either in male or female, and all diseases resulting from the vitiated humors in the blood.”\footnote{Kansas State Historical Society, “Dr. William’s Pink Pills for Pale People” http://www.kshs.org/cool3/pinkpills.htm} George was killed in an automobile accident in 1905, but King remained in contact with Mary, striking up regular correspondence with her in the 1920s. Mary was well known to be a spiritualist and would often invite mediums to her home in order to hold séances for herself and her friends. King would discuss matters of spiritualism with Mary, and by the 1930s, she was mentioned frequently in his diary.\footnote{Library and Archives Canada “Mary Fulford (1856-1946)” Behind the Diary, http://www.collectionscanada.gc.ca/king/05320113/053201130418_e.html} Mary was an important factor in King’s spiritualist pursuits, and it would be at Fulford Place that King would attend his first séance in 1932.\footnote{W.L. Mackenzie King, Diary, 13 February 1932.}
First, however, the intellectual context and the means by which King came to attend his first séance must be examined in some detail. In 1900, Canadian Methodist minister Benjamin F. Austin published a book entitled *What converted me to Spiritualism* in which spiritualists provided narratives describing their motives for attending séances. Many early spiritualists would describe a “conversion experience.” Generally, this happened as a result of a conversation that took place during a particular séance. Such a conversation, between the skeptic and the spirit of a loved one, would erase any disbelief regarding the authenticity of spirit contact. 17 Indeed, after the First World War, and also earlier during the American Civil War, conversion to spiritualism was often linked to the loss of a loved one at the front lines of battle; many people had a strong need to speak with someone “one last time.”18 The development of King’s interest in spiritualism was part of a more complex process that not only found its basis in the social, but also included the prevalence of death and responses of the bereaved during the late nineteenth century.

King was no stranger to death and personal tragedy; his best friend Albert (Bert) Harper drowned in the Ottawa River in 1901 while trying to save a woman who had fallen into the water. In 1915, King’s eldest sister Bella died, likely from a heart attack, at the age of forty-two. Then, King’s parents John and Isabel, passed away in 1916 and 1917 respectively. Even as a child, King’s younger brother, Max, had never been healthy and in 1922 he succumbed to a debilitating

17 McMillian, *Anatomy of a Séance*, 68. In *Anatomy of a Seance*, McMillian summarizes several conversion testimonials from Austin’s book. In all of the examples provided by McMillan, it was the interactions and conversations individuals had with the spirits that convinced them of the truthfulness of spiritualism and the séance experience.

18 Hazelgrove, *Spiritualism and British Society*, 14-15. Hazelgrove notes this popular interpretation in history, but postulates that Spiritualism was able to find a place in interwar society because of its capacity to incorporate and coordinate traditional thoughts and beliefs. This will be discussed in greater detail later in the chapter.
muscular disease. King had been raised in a Victorian household and observed several of the bereavement rituals that were common during that era. Romanticism influenced Victorian attitudes toward death and keepsakes were a common way to commemorate the passing of a loved one. Objects such as memorial cards, hand stitched samplers, a lock of hair formed into a ring or bracelet or woven into a wreath, were not uncommon and neither were sentimental ballads, poems and remembrances composed on the occasion of the deceased’s funeral.20 King often noted the anniversary of a death or the birthday of the deceased in his diary. For instance, on the second anniversary of his sister Bella’s death, King read from a Bible and a book of poetry that he had given Bella as a gift, feeling closer to his departed sister as he noted the passages she had underlined in her books.21 Less than a year after his mother’s death in 1917, King observed the date of his mother’s birthday with the following words:

This is dear mother's birthday. How well I remember every incident of a year ago. Her brave fight to beat back the waves of death, the trial of my faith and its supreme reward.... I thanked God anew for her precious life, the most Christ-like and beautiful I have ever known.22

King went as far as to immortalize his friend Bert Harper’s life in the form of a book. First published in 1905, The Secret of Heroism was a memoir of King’s closest friend that, as one review noted, was more than a simple tribute to a friend, “it [was] a tribute to a type of character too rare [in modern society].”23 Through his actions, King was able to keep the memory of his best friend and his family alive, but by 1922, King’s only surviving relative was his youngest sister Jennie, who lived with her husband and four children in Walkerton, and then Barrie,
Ontario. With little money and a busy household to run, Jennie was, as Charlotte Gray notes, “wrapped up in her own family” and King was alone with only his memories.²⁴

Since King’s initial interest in spiritualism was closely tied to the string of personal tragedies, the loss of kinship and friendship cannot be forgotten in any examination of King’s further pursuit of spiritualism. King was a staunch Presbyterian with a strong belief in the reality of the afterlife, and many years before his first experience at a séance, believed that he could feel the presence of the departed when he prayed, “… when in faith & prayer I have asked for them, and they have come in such an unmistakable manner, are they not to be accepted in all faith and humility [?]…”²⁵ It was not only during prayer these presences were felt, but on significant days as well; “I believe Bell nearby, watching over my life,” ²⁶ he commented on the anniversary of his sister’s death in 1917. Shortly after his mother had passed away King noticed,

Mother always seems to me nearer to me than anyone I have ever known on earth… May God increase my faith that the certainty [emphasis King’s] of her present existence & her relationship to me may not be broken by ‘worldly cares and earthy fears,’ but strengthened, that the glimpses I have at times may become real & lasting visions of reality. ²⁷

King would also look for evidence of a spiritual presence in nature. During Max’s funeral, when the sun suddenly broke through the cloudy day, King felt that “it was as thou’ dear Max was giving us all evidence of his power beyond the grave & of the realm of light where his spirit dwells.”²⁸ Isabel, Bella and Max, as well as Bert and John, died in such rapid succession that King continued to assure himself they remained with him in spirit, that they were living a

²⁴ Gray, Mrs. King, 361.
²⁵ W.L. Mackenzie King, Diary, 25 October, 1925.
²⁶ Ibid., 4 April, 1917.
²⁷ Ibid., 17 February, 1918.
²⁸ Ibid., 23 March, 1922.
peaceful, immortal life, and that he would see them again. It is evident, through the popularity of Elizabeth Phelps’ novel, *The Gates Ajar*, that such beliefs were commonly held. First published in 1869, this novel describes the continuity between the material world and an equally comfortable, middle-class suburban existence in heaven. 

Despite King’s religious conviction, the late nineteenth and early twentieth century was a time which increasingly, demanded scientific evidence. Religious conviction alone was no longer sufficient. What had once been accepted on faith now led many to wonder, for instance, how it was possible to know with certainty that someone’s soul was in heaven. As a young man, King was no exception. In 1900, one Sunday after church, he and his friend Bert Harper pondered the nature of life after death. Harper’s parents had just died and the two were trying to understand how death was a part of the “economy of life.” “Immortality of the conscious personality was a belief we both professed” King recorded in his diary. This was something that King and Harper continued to discuss; “There is no death.” Harper commented in a letter to King,

Life is eternal and makes toward perfection. When those whom we love pass, we are the more linked to that greater, larger, deeper spiritual life … the very air in which I write is filled with a thousand associations which bring me into the closest sympathy with those who have passed through the Valley of the Shadow.

---

29 This book maintained its popularity for three decades after it was written because according to Smith, it addressed the “spiritual disquiet that was created by the advance of science and the erosion of traditional Christianity.” Helen Sootin Smith, ed. *The Gates Ajar* (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 1964), vi.

30 Morley, *Death, Heaven, and the Victorians*, 102. Historians who have studied spiritualism contend that, at a time when science was asserting itself as the provider of “truth,” spiritualism was accepted because it appeared to offer concrete evidence of the metaphysical; it provided evidence of what religious leaders had been claiming all along. Braude, *Radical Spirits*, 4. A woman speaking in a voice not her own, raps on tables, an unidentified glow in a darkened corner, all of these were evidence of a force greater than anything found on earth.

31 W.L. Mackenzie King, Diary, 29 July 1900.

Harper alluded to the concept of social evolution, discussed in the previous chapter. This was the conviction that humanity possessed the ability to evolve to a point where the line between the material and spiritual worlds blurred, where, after death, the spirit could continue apart from matter and achieve perfection. It may be recalled that King, too, believed wholeheartedly in social evolution and the evolution of the human spirit.

Harper was not the only person with whom King pondered the ability of the spirit to continue after death. In a conversation just prior to his death in 1922, King’s brother Max confessed that he harboured doubts of the existence of an immortal life, wondering if it might be an “economic waste.” King reminded Max of Matthew Arnold’s view: immortal life was a gift from God to be won “on this side of the grave.” According to King’s recollection of the conversation, Max acknowledged that “he looked on death as ‘The Great Adventure’ that even the strongest materialist had to admit that there was much beyond their knowledge & might exist.” King responded thus: “I told him we would ever be together and he said to me ‘You will be with me and I will be with you always.’”

Robert Orsi has observed that religion itself is a web of relationships between heaven and earth. All religions offer humans a chance to establish relationships; men, women and children create religious worlds when they establish relationships with each other and with special beings such as saints, demons, gods, as well as ancestors and ghosts. It is through these relationships, Orsi

---

33 W.L.Mackenzie King, Diary, 8 January 1922. Matthew Arnold was an Oxford educated British poet and literary critic who, during the 1870s, wrote several theological books. Where his poetry and literary criticism have been hailed as pre-eminent Victorian works, his theological essays, though popular in North America, were less well received. Carl Dawson and John Pfordresher ed. The Critical Heritage: Matthew Arnold, Volume 1: Prose Writing (Boston: Routledge & K. Paul, 1979), 3.

34 Ibid.
contends, that humans confront their world and their inner selves.\textsuperscript{35} King created relationships in heaven. Raised as an orthodox Christian, King’s relationship with the afterlife had begun many years earlier.\textsuperscript{36} In the absence of clear theological teaching on the subject, and at a time when old Calvinist doctrines regarding eternal damnation were being cast aside, throughout his adult life King, like many others, continued to articulate his belief in the afterlife with words and thoughts of comfort. For example, in 1931 while offering condolences to an acquaintance whose son had died, King stated: “I believe strongly in the survival of the human personality…Experience after experience convinces me of the continued presence of those whom I have loved and lost awhile.”\textsuperscript{37} Then, eighteen years later, to another friend whose sister had died, King reiterated his conviction in the ability of humans to overcome death, “I am sure you will be comforted at this time by the thought that our real lives are untouched by the hand of death, and those we have ‘loved and lost awhile’ are very near us all the time.”\textsuperscript{38} A diary entry written in 1925 reveals the relationship with the spiritual world upon which King had based his words. He confided that the moment of clarity he experienced after sorting out a difficult political situation made him feel as though he could see “the whole vista clear-exactly as in the interpretation of a dream...”\textsuperscript{39} King went on to attribute this clarity to a something outside himself: “…how strange. My nature & reason revolt against ‘spiritualism’ & all the ilk- but not against things of the spirit – the belief in spiritual guidance- thro’ intuitions.”\textsuperscript{40}

\textsuperscript{35} Orsi, \textit{Between Heaven and Earth}, 2.
\textsuperscript{36} Please see chapter two discussions
\textsuperscript{37} W.L. Mackenzie King, Correspondence, 27 September 1931, Reel C 4864. NAC
\textsuperscript{38} Ibid., 24 September 1949.
\textsuperscript{39} W.L. Mackenzie King, Diary, 30 October 1925.
\textsuperscript{40} Ibid.
Relationships with the afterlife, such as the one King cultivated and maintained, indicate that at the turn of the century, people viewed the spiritual world as part of reality. This had significant implications in a world committed to scientific exploration. In response to the assumptions made by many historians that nineteenth-century science created a crisis of faith, Jenny Hazelgrove, a historian of spiritualism, offers another perspective

in the crisis of faith analysis, loss of faith in a metaphysical universe is treated as rational, inevitable and unproblematic, whereas spiritualism emerges as the pathological outcome of science’s triumphant but traumatic shedding of religion.\(^41\)

Hazelgrove goes on to explain that in actual fact, spiritualism’s success “lay partly in its ability to adapt to modern tropes, but chiefly in its capacity to incorporate and co-ordinate traditional thoughts and beliefs.”\(^42\) In other words, spiritualism was successful because it was a lived religion, something that was easily adopted into the cultural idioms of the time. Indeed that was its strength because, as Orsi points out, “religious practices and understandings have meaning only in relation to other cultural forms and in relation to life experiences…”\(^43\) In the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century, spiritualism was seen by its practitioners as a progressive form of religion because it provided observable, empirical evidence of the existence of the material vision of heaven. \(^44\)


\(^{42}\) Ibid., 14.


\(^{44}\) Hazelgrove, *Spiritualism and British Society*, 7.
Robert Orsi considered this to be part of a “religious creativity” that people, untrained in theology, bring to religion.\textsuperscript{45} This idea, that religion is appropriated by laypeople and adjusted to fit their personal experience, is crucial to the discussion of King’s gradual move toward spiritualism. King did not experience a crisis of faith. Through his personal experiences of tragedy and loss, King held onto a belief in the endurance of the human soul, remaining true to his Christian upbringing. As noted in the previous chapter, King spent much of his formative years evaluating his relationship with God through his faith. King’s desire to help the creation of a Kingdom of heaven on earth was closely related to the profession he chose; he was steadfastly committed to ensuring his life was spent serving a higher purpose. Whether as a civil servant or a clergyman, King wanted to put his Christian ideals into practice, to help the less fortunate. While the tragedies that befell King’s life may have provided the catalyst for his ultimate pursuit of spiritualism, the basis of that pursuit lay in his earlier rejection of materialism and allegiance to a progressive social Christianity that looked forward to the creation of God’s spiritual kingdom on earth.

Spiritualism was appealing to King because of its progressive nature. Orthodox religion provided vague impressions of an afterlife but King found in spiritualism something more substantial. In spiritualist circles, men and women were encouraged not only to disregard customs which limited their freedoms, but also to follow their own consciences.\textsuperscript{46} Spiritualism allowed its followers personal access to religious truth. For spiritualists, religious truth came directly to the individual without mediation in the form of clergy; mediation was not necessary because, as Anne Braude notes,

\textsuperscript{45}Orsi, \textit{The Madonna}, xix.
\textsuperscript{46}Braude, \textit{Radical Spirits}, 61.
The ability of spirits to reveal the fate of the human soul directly to human beings at the time and place of the spirit’s choosing obviated the need for scripture, sacrament, or sanctuary – even for worship. 47

Religious truth revealed itself to individuals without recourse to an external authority. Through their spiritualist practices, those who adhered to spiritualism were creating the religious world they experienced. In this situation, religion itself is not a window into a wider world or period in history, but rather a dynamic part of life that changed with people’s perception of reality. 48 Spiritualism allowed for personal transformations; it could grow with people. According to Braude, spiritualists believed that, if unconstrained by conventional religious structures, “individuals could serve as vehicles of truth, because each embodied the laws of nature in his or her being.” 49 It was this belief that laid the groundwork for rejection of any one person as the “head” of this new religion; spirits, it was thought, would be the ones to guide humanity into a new era characterized by progressive social reforms.

King viewed social reform and personal improvement as concurrent incentives to lead a Christian life. Already as a young man, King attempted to put his Christian ideals into practice, performing various social services throughout the city of Toronto in order to help create a Kingdom of heaven on earth. Throughout his adult life King continued to aspire toward the achievement of a more perfect nature. He believed that he was not alone in his need to become unselfish and in his efforts to be a better individual; the evolution of mankind would be apparent when people as a whole were no longer swayed by their senses, but instead controlled by reason and virtue. “The dual nature of man,” he elaborated, “[is] a pilgrimage from the jungle to the

47 Ibid., 57.
49 Braude, Radical Spirits, 6.
heavens, from beast to God.” King’s use of the words “dual nature” suggests that he perceived the human race as both imperfect and capable of progressing toward perfection, that is, all men possessed a dual character that they had to overcome. This was a concept rooted in well known Christian writings such as Paul’s Letter to the Romans, in which Paul states that a Christian life is one that struggles against sin. Romans 7:15 states: “For that which I am doing I do not know; for I am not practicing this thing which I wish, but I am doing this thing which I hate,” words which imply a helplessness to combat the sin in human nature. However, Paul goes on to clarify that,

For those who live according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those who live according to the Spirit, the things of the Spirit. For the mind of the flesh is death, but the mind of the Spirit is life and peace.

While orthodox Christianity stresses the inability of humanity to overcome the warring of two natures without divine grace, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century there was a new sense of possibility. As we have seen in chapter two, the discoveries in science, which some historians have interpreted as instigating a crisis of faith, also allowed for optimism and individualism. It was the philosophical idealists like Arnold Toynbee and proponents of the social gospel movement, including Walter Rauschenbusch, who speculated that spiritual enlightenment would trigger evolution and the development of a new humanity. Where earlier, salvation was seen as dependant on the atonement of Christ, in the late nineteenth century, Christ was seen as the model and teacher of a new humanity whose goal was the Kingdom of God.

---

50 Ibid., 13 November 1934.
51 Romans 7:15 (AV)
52 Romans 8:5-6 (AV)
An interest in spiritualism was not, therefore, an illogical choice for a man who was striving to evolve toward personal and social perfection. Communication with the spiritual world provided proof that one was “in tune” with things greater than oneself. As has been noted, even prior to his first séance experience King was aware of the presence of spirits and had a strong belief in heaven and the afterlife. This awareness, coupled with his desire for self improvement, led King to actively pursue communication with the spirit world. During the election campaign of 1925, King visited an acquaintance in Kingston who arranged for an audience with local clairvoyant Rachel Bleaney. As a clairvoyant, Bleaney would induce visions through some type of tactile contact with her client; from King she requested an article of clothing that he had worn. He provided her with a handkerchief. The reading would begin as Bleaney, provoked by the item the client had provided, received visions. After what King felt was an insightful and remarkable first reading, he recorded in his diary that

> the influence of the talk with that little woman is strange. It has brought me very near to the dear ones in the Great Beyond, what now seems like the Great Omnipresent, Here & Now.\(^5^4\)

Given the success of his first reading, King asked Bleaney for sessions on several more occasions. Bleaney would often speak of seeing figures standing over King, people who had passed into “The Great Hereafter,” and King continued to consult her for visions until he became somewhat disillusioned with her spiritual interpretations in the early 1930s.\(^5^5\) King’s relationship

---

\(^5^3\) W.L. Mackenzie King Diary, 20 October 1925.
\(^5^4\) Ibid.
\(^5^5\) Diary references to readings with Bleaney appear on 20 October 1925, 25 October 1925, and 1 March 1925. King’s consultations with her became less frequent when she told King he would win the 1930 election; R.B. Bennett won the 1930 election. McMullin notes that King understood he should not use séances to predict the future (4 September 1939), however as a fortune teller, that is precisely what Bleaney’s role was and so in July, 1934 King reminded himself to heed his mother’s advice: “let God send who will, not for us to call those we want.” (5 July 1934). It should be noted that King maintained his contact with Bleaney, feeling that she in particular had a
with Bleaney, who was more a fortune teller than a true medium, is notable because she compelled him to a greater awareness of the spiritual world. Not only was King cognizant of spirit presences, he recognized their guidance could help him in his desire to strive for a “higher life.” For example, in 1926 King marked the anniversary of his mother’s death by reflecting that her character was “as nearly perfect as any human could be,” expressing his wish to be more like his mother in part because he felt he was becoming materialistic. He went on to resolve that,

With God’s help & her guidance from the beyond I believe I will be able to do better. I am sure of her existence in the Great Beyond and that she & Max & Bell & father do guide & care for me, but I fear that I often make it hard for their spirits to reach and touch mine. May God grant closer communion with the Kingdom of Heaven.  

With this diary entry, King reveals that he was willing to pursue closer communication with loved ones in heaven so that he could become a better man. It is true that initially, King was skeptical of spiritualism and séances for in the early twentieth-century, to those outside of spiritualist circles, the very words “spiritualism” and “séance” conjured images of hazy, poorly-lit rooms furnished with heavy Victorian décor. Mediumship itself “appeared to a range of twentieth-century commentators as an unconscionable fraud, fit only for the fairground.” While King had expressed his own misgivings toward spiritualism, the 1920s saw his resolve to strive for a more perfect life become more firm, culminating in his first séance experience at Mary Fulford’s home in 1932.

---

56 W.L. Mackenzie King, Diary, 17 December 1926.
57 Ibid.
58 Hazelgrove, *Spiritualism and British Society*, 2.
59 Ibid., 4.
On February 13th, 1932, King had received a note from Mary indicating that Etta Wriedt, a medium from Detroit, would be visiting Canada, and inquiring as to whether King would like to visit while Mrs. Wriedt was at the Fulford’s Brockville residence. King accepted, and looked forward to the event as “one of the most remarkable in… [his]… life.” King arrived at the Fulford residence the following Sunday afternoon. He was greeted by Mary, her son, George, and Mrs. Etta Wriedt herself. It was not unusual for Wriedt to visit a private residence; in fact, this was the way she preferred to conduct her séances. Wriedt was well known in Canadian Spiritualist circles due to her frequent trips to Toronto, but when she travelled, Wriedt tried to avoid publicity. She preferred to have harmonious gatherings among spiritualists, rather than public séances, which she felt were more a spectacle that served only to convince those who did not believe. King himself admitted in his diary that his hostess’s promises of spirit communication were difficult to believe, but he arrived at Fulford place with his skepticism in check: “… & [sic] were Mrs. Fulford not the person she is I would have difficulty in believing it.” After a visit and brief luncheon, Wriedt conducted two séances for King and Mary. The following day, two more séances were held before King returned to Ottawa. The exact details of the Fulford Place séances are not well known; King did not elaborate on specific details surrounding events of that day in his diary; however, a description from one of Wriedt’s Toronto séances recorded by columnist Phillips Thompson for the Globe newspaper provides insight.

According to Thompson, Wriedt preferred to begin her gatherings by asking her sitters, who were arranged in a circle, to say the Lord’s Prayer and sing hymns. “God Save the King” was

---

60 W.L. Mackenzie King, Diary, 13 February, 1932.
62 W.L. Mackenzie King, Diary, 21 February, 1932.
also sung, usually at the request of Wriedt’s control, “Dr. Sharp.”\textsuperscript{63} Wriedt was a “direct voice” medium which means that she allowed a control to speak through her. In spiritualist circles, the term “control” was used to refer to the spirit who took over the faculties of the medium in order to communicate with sitters gathered for the séance. It was believed that the control and medium had a reciprocal relationship; the medium had the ability to attract certain spirits, and the spirits would become fond of certain mediums and seek them to act as their voice. \textsuperscript{64} Wriedt, for example, often communicated with the spirit of Dr. Sharp, but other spirits would also introduce themselves during her séances, so they could have individual communications with members of séance circle. Phillips Thompson reported to the \textit{Globe} that, at first, these new spirits would speak in whispers, but their voices grew more audible as Wriedt encouraged responses and interactions from the sitters, which served to strengthen the spirits themselves.\textsuperscript{65}

During the Fulford Place séances, King was able to converse with the spirits of deceased family members, including his mother Isabel, his father John and eldest sister Bella.\textsuperscript{66} King was awed at the marvelous results of these séances, calling the whole experience “remarkable.”\textsuperscript{67} It was this weekend, in February of 1932, that marked the beginning of King’s regular participation in spiritualist activities. The identity of the spirits that revealed themselves to King during the Fulford Place séances, were reflective of personal tragedies that had occurred in King’s life between 1901 and 1922, and following his first séances in which he spoke with his mother,

\begin{itemize}
  \item McMillan, \textit{Anatomy of a Séance}, 67-68.
  \item E.W. and M.H. Wallis, \textit{A Guide to Mediumship and Psychical Unfoldment} (Chicago,IL: The Occult Publishing House, 1903), 47.
  \item McMillan, \textit{Anatomy of a Séance}, 66-67.
  \item W.L. Mackenzie King, Diary, 13 February 1932, 14 February 1932 and 22 February 1932.
  \item Ibid., 21 February, 1932.
\end{itemize}
father, and sister, King continued to call upon Wriedt’s connection to the spiritual world. Indeed, King sought Wriedt’s mediumship when he had returned to Ottawa, only three days after the Fulford Place séances. He invited Mary Fulford and Wriedt to Laurier House, his private residence, for a séance. King’s close friend Joan Patteson was also present and according to King, equally amazed by the sitting. King noted in his diary that Joan appeared “full of the wonder & mystery [of the experience]”

One might ask how King had been able to resolve his previous skepticism. Diary entries indicate that his trust in Mary Fulford’s character had alleviated his misgivings; however his diary also indicated that he had been expecting to have a remarkable experience. The Fulford Place séances did not lead King to a “conversion experience” whereby his skepticism was eradicated, nor did the séances become the answer to King’s acute loneliness brought about by the deaths of his family and friends. Indeed, King had anticipated his arrival at Fulford Place with a feeling that something extraordinary would happen. And while it is true that King himself was lonely, unlike those who converted to spiritualism as a way to make one final connection with the deceased, King’s involvement in spiritualism came well after the deaths of those with whom he now communicated.

---

69 Ibid., 24 February, 1932.
70 Throughout this chapter, the terms “conversion” and “conversion experience” will refer to an individual’s shift from disbelief to belief in the authenticity of communicating with the deceased through the various methods employed by spiritualists.
71 W.L. Mackenzie King, Diary, 13 February 1932
72 Ibid., 18 March, 1922. In this diary entry King admits that he wishes he had a wife for company because “the loneliness at times passes all words.”
Can this participation in séances be seen as religious expression? Moreover, were these séances linked to the progressive Christianity to which King had been drawn? From a modern viewpoint, séances would seem to require a wholehearted suspension of disbelief and an embrace of the fantastical; a séance was not like any orthodox religious ceremony. Typically, spiritualists believed the success of a séance depended on the cumulative power of the people who were participating; empathic feelings would ensure the balance of psychic forces was maintained for the duration of the séance. Ambiance was of utmost importance, and therefore a great effort was made to create a feeling of union between participants: music would be played, hymns were the most appropriate, flowers might provide a light scent, and strong light should be blocked with “artistic glacier paper.” Once the necessary preparations were made, sitters would seat themselves in a circle and join hands in order to activate the psychic flow.  

The intermingling of Christian elements with a belief in the supernatural has led to the popular perception that throughout the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries it was only the “half-baked, the uneducated, and the credulous who appeared at séances,” those individuals who were not clever enough to distinguish an authentic Christian ritual from a false one. However, according to historian Robert Moore, many prominent people including author and abolitionist Harriet Beecher Stowe, American economist David Ames Wells, and Canadian author Lucy Maud Montgomery demonstrated an interest in spirit communication. University of Toronto Associate Professor Pamela Klassen’s research in religious studies even cites a group of

73 Ibid., 68-69 and Braude, Radical Spirits, 20-21. In addition to the hymns, there were other Christian undertones in the séance experience. For example, there are records of séances in Canada that began with the recitation of the Lord’s Prayer. McMullin, Anatomy of a Séance, 66.
75 Ibid., 3.
Anglican clerics who, in the 1920s, experimented with telepathy and considered themselves “Christians harnessing the powers of technology and divinity.” How could educated, intelligent individuals believe what they were seeing and hearing at a séance? The answer lies in what Orsi describes as one of the primary dimensions of any discussion of religion: the idiomatic boundaries of “what can be desired, fantasized, imagined and felt” within the confines of a culture.

Through the course of the nineteenth century, these idiomatic boundaries had, for some, come to include communication with the spirit world. Since historical examinations of spiritualism have focused on its beginnings with the Fox sisters in 1840s America, there is an assumption that spiritualism fell out of popularity in the twentieth century. This has been fueled by the aforementioned widely held view that an interest in spiritualism can be traced to a crisis of faith, instigated by the increasing secularization of society brought about, in part, through advances in science. However, even though “the modern world has assiduously and systematically disciplined the senses not to experience sacred presence,” this was not necessarily true in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. While the “imaginations of moderns are trained toward sacred absence,” in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, religion was very much a part of everyday life. Historian Ann Braude observes that during the 1840s, when

---

79 Orsi, *Between Heaven and Earth*, 12. It should be noted that the modern world is anything but secular. As Leigh Eric Schmidt notes, the desire to have a relationship with God, to ‘hear’ Him is stronger than ever. Leigh Eric Schmidt, *Hearing Things, Religion, Illusion and the American Enlightenment*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000), 246.
80 Ibid.
spiritualism was in its infancy, few people would have viewed science and religion in opposition to one another. In fact during that time major scientific advancements, such as the use of electricity in a telegraph machine, would seem just as credible as the claims made by the spiritualists. Later, at the turn of the century, radio waves and electricity were still not fully understood and little was known of how the human mind worked and so, efforts were made in the 1910s and 1920s to use the scientific method to establish a link between Christianity, new technological developments, and human telepathy. Thus, if spiritualism is to be regarded within the parameters of a lived religion, in the early twentieth century there was a rich cultural context in which it could survive. Where in the late nineteenth century metropolitan cities, philosophical idealism, and the social gospel movement, had provided a context in which King’s Christian faith could develop, the 1920s and 30s provided opportunities to apply the scientific method to spirit exploration. Indeed, after his first séance experiences in 1932, King undertook his own investigations in spiritualism, referring to his interest as “psychic research.”

Described by historian Alex Owen as spiritualism’s “uneasy travelling companion,” psychic research was conducted in order to ascertain which spirit phenomena were real and which were not. At the turn of the century and well into the 1920s and 1930s, psychic researchers attempted to offer an impartial, scientific opinion regarding the truth of séance spirit communication. Since the goal of the nineteenth-century scientist had been to explain an orderly world, scientists were to accept the facts of nature as they were presented; to do otherwise would be unscientific.

81 Braude, Radical Spirits, 4.
82 Klassen, “Radio Mind…”, 652.
83 W.L.Mackenzie King, Diary, 20 November 1933. The next day King stated in his diary that if it had not been for his duties to the Canadian people as a civil servant, he would choose to devote the remainder of his life to the study of psychic phenomena. 21 November, 1933.
Psychic research adhered to scientific principles and methodology because its goal was to marry the physical and metaphysical realm. Those who undertook psychic research believed in an integrated cosmos, where conceptual divisions such as rationality and intuition, the world of the dead and of the living, science and faith, were bridged. Organizations for psychic research were established, and one of the earliest was the Society for Psychical Research (SPR) founded in London, England in 1882. The SPR sought both to define a unifying principle for the cosmos as well as remain committed to scientific procedures while investigating phenomena associated with mediumistic display. In 1886 Frederick Myers, a founding member of the SPR was quoted as saying: “… just as the old orthodoxy of religion was too narrow to contain men’s knowledge, so now the new orthodoxy of materialistic science is too narrow to contain their feelings and aspirations.”

Psychical research and spiritualism shared many characteristics. For example, Alex Owen notes that the language of early twentieth-century spiritualism was scientific. People became “investigators,” and observed “demonstrations” of the truths of spiritualism that were produced under “test conditions” in the séance room. While psychic researchers and spiritualists both sought to establish a link between the material and metaphysical worlds, it was the differences in their methodology which created tension. Spiritualists believed that truth was accessible through simplicity of thought and emotion, unlike psychic researchers who advocated the discovery of truth through formal learning. The SPR’s tendency for scientific elitism did nothing to endear itself to spiritualists, who regarded the organization’s members and work as insufferably

---

85 Hazelgrove, *Spiritualism and British Society*, 195.
86 Ibid., 196.
87 Frederick Myers transcribed in Hazelgrove, *Spiritualism and British Society*, 193.
88 Ibid., 4.
condescending.\footnote{Hazelgrove, \textit{Spiritualism and British Society}, 197.} This tension between psychic researchers and spiritualists persisted throughout the interwar years. Eleanor Sidgwick, the head of the SPR during the 1920s and 1930s, tried to distance her organization from spiritualists through serious research that was conservative, respectable, and rigorous. Spiritualists, in turn, “were exasperated by this cautiousness.”\footnote{Ibid., 90} After all, if one could see the evidence of spirit presence, what more did one need? \footnote{Ibid., 197-198.}

Here is yet another way in which spiritualism falls under the definition of “lived religion”; again, to cite Robert Orsi, in order to study religion, historians must have a clear sense of “what has been embodied in the corporeality of the people who participate in religious practices; what their tongues, skin ears, ‘know.’”\footnote{Orsi, “Everyday Miracles…” \textit{Lived Religion in America}, 7.} Psychological research went further and called for a similar knowledge from its practitioners. The mind also needed to understand what the senses “know.” People tried to understand what it was they had come to know of the afterlife as a result of the experiences spiritualism had provided.

King, too, grappled with what he knew of the afterlife. An academic himself, King was not content to restrict his interest in spiritualism to the séance room, and following his first experience at Fulford Place, he set out to conduct his own investigations in spirit phenomena. It may be recalled that King solicited medium Etta Wriedt for additional séances following his Fulford Place experience in 1932; however just over one year later King attempted spirit communication without the aide of a medium using the table rapping method. With this method of spirit communication, participants gathered around a table and asked questions of any spirits...
who might be listening. Spirits responded by knocking on the table, and sometimes, they would actually move the table itself.  

It was King’s friend Dominion Archivist Arthur Doughty, and Doughty’s wife, who demonstrated this method of spirit communication for King after a dinner at Laurier House in November, 1933. King was astonished at the messages that were received and did not doubt their authenticity. A few days after this experience, King enlisted the help of his friend Joan Patteson to attempt communication with spirits using the rapping method. After she had participated in the séances that King had arranged in Ottawa with Etta Wriedt in 1932, Patteson, and to a lesser extent her husband Godfroy, shared King’s interest in spiritualism and so, to test the spirits, they asked the name of Patteson’s husband. Their attempt at spirit communication was deemed a success when a spirit rapped in return, spelling the name “Godfroy.” After this success, King, Joan, and at times Godfroy, would gather around a small table and ask questions of the spirits who were present. Through these informal experiments, King increasingly grew to believe “there is the strong reason why I should not hesitate to believe I am entirely right in continuing to explore the phenomena and in believing the revelations that I have in scriptures & in dreams.”

---

93 Erik Frederick Jensen, Schumann. (New York, Oxford University Press, 2001), 269. It is interesting that in this biography of the Romantic era composer Robert Schumann, the author notes that Schumann’s interest in table rapping was “a manifestation of his naiveté and often childlike nature.” Robert Moore’s assessment of the popular perception that only the ‘half-baked’ or ‘credulous’ were thought to believe in spiritualism seems to hold true in this recently published book.

94 W.L.Mackenzie King, Diary, 15 November, 1933. King met Doughty through his role as Archivist and Keeper of the Public Records, but they quickly became friends. Doughty is mentioned in several occasions in King’s diary as an “interesting man” and regular dinner guest. 3 January, 1906 and 10 January, 1911.


96 Ibid., 18 November 1933.

97 References to “table wrapping” as King referred to it are made throughout 1933 and 1934 in the diaries.

98 W.L.Mackenzie King. 10 July 1933.
Many psychical researchers at the time conducted formal experiments in order to gain an understanding of spiritual phenomena. In the U.S., there was some effort to establish psychical research as a branch of university research. At both the University of Pennsylvania and Stanford University prior to World War I, wealthy philanthropists donated money earmarked to investigate spiritual phenomena.\(^9^9\) During the late 1920s and early 1930s, researchers in the psychology department at Duke University conducted experiments in psychical research. J.B. Rhine, head of the research team, based his research on whether or not it was possible for a person to “perceive (or respond to) objects or events without dependence upon the recognized senses.”\(^1^0^0\) Rhine’s experiments were widely considered by other psychical researchers to be flawed and he was only able to publish academically after founding his own journal, the *Journal of Parapsychology*. King himself took out a subscription for two years, between 1937 and 1938.\(^1^0^1\)

Despite his interest in the work of J. B. Rhine, it is important to note that King did not conduct formal psychical research; he did not appear to regard psychical research and spiritualism in opposition to one another in the way some members of psychical research associations viewed themselves at odds with mediums in the séance rooms. Instead, King’s goal was to increase his own awareness of everyday spiritual occurrences, and through this increased spiritual awareness, King hoped to facilitate his personal evolution. For instance, King noted coincidences in his life, interpreting them as evidence that someone in the other world was watching over him and trying

---

\(^9^9\) Moore, *In Search of White Crows*, 169.
\(^1^0^0\) J.B. Rhine, “‘The Scientific Monthly’, November 1940, 1” Spiritualism Series, Reel H3036, NAC
\(^1^0^1\) W.L. Mackenzie King, “Journal of Parapsychology,” *Spiritualism Series*, Reel H3035, NAC.
to draw his attention to a matter of importance. In his personal notes from 1934, King recorded a coincidence he felt was remarkable. On December 6th, King had been speaking to someone of Bert Harper, noting that it was the thirtieth anniversary of Bert’s death. Later, King discovered that “in the morning mail I received a letter from Dr. Francis J. O’Brian of Rochester, N.Y. referring to his friendship, my own and Harper’s at university forty years ago.” King took this coincidence, speaking of Bert Harper, and receiving a letter on the same day from a mutual friend of King and Harper’s, as a sign; a spirit was signaling King to renew his friendship with Francis O’Brian, and so he did.

King was also interested in the subconscious workings of the mind; he went to great length to interpret his dreams, believing they were a means through which spirits could communicate with him. The image of Woodside, King’s childhood home in Berlin, Ontario, appeared to him often in dreams, which he referred to as “visions.” When Woodside first appeared to King in a vision, he saw himself riding the family horse across their property, pausing to speak with the new owner who had done a lot of cosmetic restoration to the home. King was unsure of what this vision meant, but interpreted it thus:

I have still to see the significance of the Woodside dream unless it be as Woodside is usually evidence of the nearness of loved ones. The riding, the green hills etc are all, I imagine, good signs.

In another vision from 1935, King was chased by a group of men, two of whom were politicians he knew. He sought shelter in his Woodside home, where his mother and grandmother were

---

103 W.L. Mackenzie King Spiritualism Series, 8 January 1934, Reel H3037, N AC.
104 Ibid.
105 W.L. Mackenzie King, Diary, 15 February 1935.
doing the washing. King later interpreted the house itself as a symbol of “home and the home influences guarding and being safe with them.” King took from this dream a message of security since in it, his mother seemed as though she wanted him to be secure, telling King to relax in his old bedroom. Armed with this interpretation, King found great comfort in the vision; he believed that the chase indicated his strength was being tested and Woodside indicated security would be achieved. King went further and drew parallels between the vision and his political life; he knew he had done well delivering a lengthy speech in the House of Commons earlier that day because it had been a test of his strength, and in the end, well received by the members of the house.

King did not rely solely upon his own interpretations, but also sought better understanding of these spiritual experiences by reading books and journals devoted to psychical research as well as corresponding with influential people within spiritualist and psychical research circles. One of the organizations with which King had contact was the American Psychical Institute (API). In 1933, King had the opportunity to meet with the founders of the API, Hereward and Marie Carrington. Hereward Carrington published several books about psychical research, among them *A Primer of Psychical Research* in 1932. In it, Carrington is careful to delineate the difference between psychic research and spiritualism; psychic research was not an attempt to communicate with some spiritual world by means of mediums. Rather, psychic research was “the scientific study of all sorts of supernatural phenomena.” Carrington believed that psychical research was

---

106 Ibid., 21 January 1935.
107 Ibid.
108 Ibid., 12 April 1933.
important so that humanity could have a deeper and better understanding of self, and perhaps discover its true nature.\textsuperscript{110}

In a letter to King after their meeting, Marie Carrington expounded on the official mandate of the API. She and her husband carried out their research in the hope that they would be able to provide people with proven fact that they could hope for survival of the individual; “we are searching for the truth-telling, to find the meaning and method of life.”\textsuperscript{111} According to Carrington, through psychical research the API hoped to provide the foundation on which a new philosophy could be built. This philosophy would rule out greed and selfishness, in turn ruling out poverty, war and other destructive activities; all earthly possessions would be meaningless in comparison to pursuit of this philosophy of happiness and contentment.\textsuperscript{112} Carrington made the goals of psychical research clear: encourage people to become more aware of their relationship with the material world, so that they might transcend it, thus creating a more progressive world.

Considering the API’s goal to help humanity realize perfection, it comes as little surprise that King had an interest in the Carringtons’ research work. In her letter to King, Mrs. Carrington speaks of the progression of humanity toward harmony. These thoughts would have been particularly appealing to King, who in 1898 had already come to believe “the doctrine of evolution makes man one with the universe…All evolution points to immortality, creation alone finds completeness only in immortal life & perfection.”\textsuperscript{113} Here, King had referred to

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{110} Ibid., 12.
\textsuperscript{111} Marie Carrington, Spiritualism Series, 3 November 1933, Reel H3034, N AC.
\textsuperscript{112} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{113} W.L. Mackenzie King, Diary, 12 November 1898.
\end{flushright}
immortality as an end point of human evolution, something to be achieved. King’s belief in the importance of human evolution, which had developed when he was a young man within the context of social Christianity, is vital to the understanding of this later pursuit of psychical research. Drawing attention to its evolutionary framework he viewed psychical research as “proving wherein the order of evolution is truly such, on mental as well as physical plane & spiritual as well as mental.” Along with other psychical researchers, King perceived spirit communication as the next step in human evolution. Indeed years earlier, Canadian minister Benjamin F. Austin had stated his own belief that contact with people in the afterlife was the first phase in the creation of the link between heaven and earth described in the Bible; “now in the psychic phenomena of our age, we have a line of evidence that demonstrates the truth of those remarkable occurrences of the Scriptures.”

While the methodology of psychical research was scientific, intended to provide proof of spiritual phenomena, some psychical researchers viewed themselves as champions of an improved form of orthodox Christianity; they were facilitating the evolution of humans toward perfection. Sir Oliver Lodge, a late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century British physicist and psychical researcher, believed that religion on its own fostered a meek and “dove-like” resignation to divine will, just as science alone cultivated “a vigorous adult, intelligent and

---

114 Ibid., 3 October 1929; 11 June 1933; 13 November 1934 are only a few examples of many diary references to immortality and evolution.
115 Ibid., 11 July, 1933.
116 B.F. Austin cited in McMillian, Anatomy of a Senace, 74 – 75.
serpent-like in his wisdom."\textsuperscript{117} However, when religion was combined with science, a more powerful and knowledgeable person was the result.\textsuperscript{118}

Despite these moral goals, the establishment of psychic research within the academic sphere, and the founding of organized institutions for psychic research such as the SPR and API, psychic research and spiritualism were not widely accepted or trusted within the public sphere.\textsuperscript{119} It is true that spiritualism itself enjoyed a brief resurgence immediately following World War I because the heavy causalities that resulted from the war made bereavement a pervasive experience. If a loved one had been killed in battle, it would be natural to want to see him one last time.\textsuperscript{120} But during the 1920s and 30s, increasingly, mediums were viewed as dangerous or downright mad, a threat to social order and possessing of the ability to bring harm to society. Mediums were often accused of preying upon the relatives of the deceased soldiers, giving them false hope to see their loved ones again.\textsuperscript{121} Certainly, worries of fraudulence and trickery had surrounded spiritualism from the time the first raps were heard in the presence of Katie and Margaret Fox; even those who experienced a séance sometimes struggled to understand their experiences.

King was aware of this. When he was actively pursuing his interest in spiritualism in the 1920s and 1930s, he held two of the highest political offices in Canada, Prime Minister and the Leader of the Opposition. His private interests were something that King went to lengths to keep separate from his public persona. For example, after receiving a palm reading in 1934 from

\textsuperscript{118} Ibid., 5-6.
\textsuperscript{119} Hazelgrove, \textit{Spiritualism and British Society}, 199.
\textsuperscript{120} Ibid., 13.
\textsuperscript{121} Ibid., 151.
fortuneteller Quest Brown, King was asked by her if she could include his character sketch in her latest book. King reluctantly agreed, replying in a letter “to be frank however, I continue to have abhorrence of publicity, especially in regard to matters more or less intimate and personal in their character.”

King could claim a desire to guard his personal life because of the public nature of his work but at the same time, he regretted the way this weakened his personal pursuits. In a letter to the Governor-General’s wife Lady Minto, King apologized for not maintaining correspondence, writing “Alas, public life robs us of so much of the personal side of life. [Emphasis King’s]”

Biographer H. Reginald Hardy noted that King sought to draw a clear line of demarcation between matters that he deemed completely personal, and matters on which he deemed the nation had a right to share concern. King was also aware that as the representative of the Canadian people, he could not trumpet his beliefs; it would be particularly problematic for those who were not receptive to spiritualism. As British historian of spiritualism Jenny Hazelgrove notes, The Vagrancy Act, drafted and passed in 1824 in Britain, was often cited as a reason to distrust mediums and spiritualism. The wording of the act stated firmly that those with genuine abilities as mediums did not exist, and during the inter-war period, it was used to isolate those claiming mediumistic abilities, labeling them as imposters, rogues, and vagabonds. As a British colony, British North American had been subject to British law and instances of law enforcement in Ontario citing the British Vagrancy Act as legal justification for the arrest of mediums and fortune tellers were not uncommon. Discretion, then, was of the

---

122 W.L. Mackenzie King, Correspondence, 18 July 1934, Reel 3039, NAC. This correspondence does not indicate why King sought a palm reading from a fortune teller. However, it is likely that King perceived fortune tellers as mediums. King had consulted with Rachel Belaney, a Kingston fortune teller, prior to this and would refer to her as a medium. 23 September 1931. The Quest Brown palm reading could have been part of his psychic research.
123 Ibid., 24 September 1939, Reel C3747, NAC.
124 Hardy, Mackenzie King of Canada, 164.
125 Hazelgrove, Spiritualism and British Society 17, 151.
126 McMullin, Anatomy of a Seance, 17-19. In his book historian Stan McMullin outlines several cases from 1899 in 97
utmost importance and this can be seen in the correspondence between King and Dr. J.E. Hett, an oncologist from south-western Ontario. An acquaintance of King’s, Hett shared his interest in spiritualism. In a letter dated July of 1933, Hett referred to an earlier conversation in which King had confessed it was difficult not to be able to discuss “psychical matters” with anyone. The doctor expressed sympathy, noting that he often felt the same way and went on to say “…but still your position is far worse because you dare not speak about matters so dear to your heart to anyone.” Hett understood the delicacy of the situation, even offering to buy books about psychic research and spiritualism on King’s behalf, while cautioning “I would suggest and perhaps warn you not to even buy any direct[ly].” Hett felt that King should be careful not to give anyone the slightest of chances to undermine his public position.

Indeed, in his quest to continue his research into the spiritual, when King contacted prominent individuals he would ask for their confidentiality. Dr. Anita Mühl of California was a psychologist and interested in automatic writing as a way to reveal personal problems that might have been repressed early in life. King wrote to her when he was interested in acquiring a copy of her book, *Automatic Writing*. His interest in her work had prompted him to contact her, but King cautioned in his letter “For reasons which you will appreciate, I have thought it advisable to
keep my interests in these studies wholly confidential. I shall appreciate you so regarding it.”

King was also reluctant to take out a membership with the API for reasons of confidentiality. His correspondent, Marie Carrington, encouraged him to take a pseudonym and King’s membership in the API was officially granted under the name “M.K. Venice.” In a letter to Nandor Fodor, a research officer with the International Institute for Psychical Research, King expressed his thanks for a reference book but declined the proffered membership with that organization: “For reasons you will appreciate it has seemed inadvisable to become too actively identified in the public mind, pending the time that I may continue to hold my present position.” It has been implied that shame drove King to hide his psychical research and pursuit of spiritualism. However it can be argued that, as was the case in the Church Union movement in 1924, King was acutely aware of the importance of maintaining a separation between his personal religious beliefs and his role as the Prime Minister of Canada. In his 1949 biography of King, H. Reginald Hardy notes that King’s critics accused him of being “emotionally incapable of baring his private life to the world;” however it was King himself who believed public display of private matters to be a great indecency. In this light, it was not shame, but King’s sense of propriety as a public official that prompted him to keep his personal psychical research and his spiritualism separate from public awareness.

Similarly, much has been made of the nature of King’s relationship with his mother, a relationship that has invited psychoanalysis from several historians who have studied King. It

---

131 W.L. Mackenzie King to Dr. Anita Muhl, Spiritualism Series, Reel H 3034, NAC.
132 Marie Carrington to W.L. Mackenzie King, Spiritualism Series, 23 October 1935, Reel H 3034, NAC.
133 Please see chapter 1 discussion regarding C.P. Stacey’s biography A Very Double Life.
134 Hardy, Mackenzie King of Canada, 360.
135 See, for example: C.P. Stacey, A Very Double Life, The Private World of Mackenzie King (Toronto: Macmillan of Canada, 1976); Charlotte Grey, Mrs King, The Life and Times of Isabel Mackenzie King
should, however, be noted that according to King’s biographer R. McGregor-Dawson, it was not only mother and son, but the entire King family who were exceptionally close.\textsuperscript{136} Drawing this conclusion from a thorough examination of the family correspondence as well as from King’s diary, Dawson notes “It is evident that the King family life was an unusually happy one.”\textsuperscript{137} Their deep affection for one another, according to Dawson, seemed to have stemmed from sympathetic understanding, a shared sense of humor and good-natured banter amongst one another. Along with constant encouragement and outspoken praise for accomplishments, they appeared to stand together in their loyalty for one another; indeed Isabel King’s oft repeated refrain was “united we stand, divided we fall.”\textsuperscript{138} The King family, John and Isabel and their children Bella, Willie, Max and Jennie, remained close until parted by death between the years 1915 and 1922. By the mid 1920s, King and his youngest sister Jennie were the sole surviving members of the King family, and Jennie lived hours from Ottawa. A middle-aged man with no wife or children, King was single mindedly devoted to his work, but it is undeniable he was lonely. It was this loneliness that persuaded King to try and speak to his departed family, but while loneliness acted as the catalyst for King’s pursuit of spiritualism, it was not the sole cause. Contact with family and friends through séances, table rapping, and dream interpretation may

\textsuperscript{136} Joy Esterby provided one such analysis of King in \textit{Knight of the Holy Spirit}, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1980) as did Charlotte Grey in her work \textit{Mrs. King, The Life and Times of Isabel Mackenzie King} (Canada: Penguin Books, 1997).

\textsuperscript{137} Dawson, \textit{W.L.M.K. A Political Biography}, 19. Dawson was correct in his observation that the King family seemed “unusually happy”. Stephen Kern believed the Victorian family was not the “rock in the midst of the rushing stream” that it appeared to be. Kern saw it as a source of anxiety and conflict that was a function of the excessive intimacy and interdependence the family imposed upon its members. Stephen Kern in L. DeMause, \textit{The New Psychohistory}. (New York: The Psychohistory Press, 1975), 30.

\textsuperscript{138} Grey, \textit{Mrs. King}, 358.
have served to grant comfort to a lonely man, but the conversations themselves provided only short-term gratification and reassurance.

The King diaries document the development of the moral, religious, and personal beliefs that shaped King’s life for the next fifty-seven years. Beginning with a desire to achieve personal perfection, the King diaries indicate that his struggle toward this goal encompassed all aspects of his life, both public and private. From his social work in Toronto, research in graduate school, duties as a labour negotiator and responsibility as a politician to his role as a son, brother, and friend, King was on a lifelong journey. In the diaries a transformation took place; King’s personal evolution is documented as he strived to live life in service to the people of Canada. It was this life in service to others that King believed would allow him to cast off the constraints of material desire. Instead, through spiritualism King would be able to focus on the creation of a stronger link between the material and spiritual worlds. In a 1933 letter, Marie Carrington invited King to indulge in a vision of the future: “imagine an entire human race - conscious and aware of their progress toward perfection and balance and perfect harmony!!”\(^{139}\) King had not only envisioned such a future, but had begun a personal quest for perfection and harmony close to forty years earlier, when he took up his pen to keep a diary. Seen in this way, the many hours Canada’s tenth Prime Minister devoted to the study of spirits in the afterlife were not irrelevant or reflective of archaic and antiquated beliefs. Robert Orsi has noted that a lived religion is fluid,

\(^{139}\) Carrington, *Spiritualism Series*, 3 November 1933.
mobile, and accessible through more than institutions and doctrines; religion, he points out, must be understood through the multi-faceted power of cultural structures.\footnote{Hall, Lived Religion in America, xi.}

This is pertinent to understanding King’s engagement with spiritualism. In the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century, spiritualism was not simply a symptom of widespread anxiety regarding the threat of science toward religion, a response to a crisis of faith, as historians such as Ramsay Cook have argued. Rather, spiritualism offered individuals a way of organizing supernatural experiences in relation to existing personal, social and cultural realities.\footnote{Hazelgrove, Spiritualism in British Society, 23.} For King, these were complex. He had lost almost all of his family and his best friend when he was still a young man and for an individual with such strong religious convictions, it was natural to turn to his faith for refuge and guidance. Spiritualism not only re-enforced, but expanded King’s beliefs, for he was also a deeply spiritual man who lived during a time when the religious and supernatural were ubiquitous in everyday life. As Pamela Klassen points out in her study of three contemporary clergymen, many who embraced both modern ideas and orthodox Christianity saw themselves trapped between two types of skepticism: the biblical and scientific.\footnote{Klassan, “Radio Mind…”, 674.} Like them, King had to find his own way within this dilemma, doing so in creative and personal ways. Thus, religion, instead of being thought of as an inherited, fixed part of one’s being, should be thought of as something that is adaptable and subject to change.\footnote{Orsi, “Everyday Miracles…”, 8} On this basis, spiritualism should not be viewed as a deception of the naïve, nor should King’s spiritualist practices be seen as bizarre. William Lyon Mackenzie King perceived himself as a man of destiny; God had great work for him to do and spiritualism both allowed King to lead a Christian life of public service and
provided a channel through which he could lead a singular life in pursuit of personal spiritual evolution.
Bibliography

Abbreviations
NAC  Library and Archives Canada.

Primary Sources

Archives
Chas. W. Gordon, in W.L. Mackenzie King, Correspondence, 7 June, 1906. Series J 8, Reel C 1979, NAC.

W.L.Mackenzie King. Diary, R10383-19-5-E, Series J 13, NAC.

_____________. Correspondence, R10383-14-6-E, Series J 8, Reel C 4864, NAC.

_____________. Memoranda and Notes, R10383-10-9-E, Series J 4, Reel 2475, NAC.

_____________. Spiritualism Series, R10383-15-8-E, Series J 9, Reel H 3034, 3035, 3036, 3037, NAC.

Unsigned Articles attributed to King in The Globe, Memoranda and Notes Series J 4, Reel N 19859, 19861 and 19863, NAC.

Books


____________., *Social Statics*. London: John Chapman, 1851
http://oll.libertyfund.org/title/273/6434


**Newspapers**

A.L. Breithaupt, as quoted in *The Hamilton Spectator*, 5 July 1948.

H.L. Staebler, as quoted in *The Kitchener-Waterloo Record*, 24 July 1950.

Canada’s Industrial Peacemaker” *The Globe*, July 6th, 1907.
Secondary Sources

Books


____________. *The View from Murney Tower, Salem Bland, the Late-Victorian Controversies, and the Search for a New Christianity*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2008.


Burke, Sara Z. *Seeking the Highest Good: Social Service and Gender at the University of Toronto, 1888-1937*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1996.


Jensem, Erik Frederick. Schumann. (New York, Oxford University Press, 2001)


**Articles**


http://web.ebscohost.com.proxy.queensu.ca/ehost/detail?vid=8&hid=113&sid=4775c2245b474da8-b7e6-441477906630%40sessionmgr104 (Accessed 05/27/08)


**Websites**


Kansas State Historical Society, “Dr. William’s Pink Pills for Pale People” http://www.kshs.org/cool3/pinkpills.htm (accessed 02/01/08)


Theses