

John W. Edmonds (1816-1874)

John W. Edmonds, who served as Chief Justice of the New York State Supreme Court, is believed to have been the first true psychical researcher. Following the advent of the spirit communication epidemic that hit the world with the so-called "Rochester Knocking" in 1848, a number of educated and prominent men and women observed various mediumistic phenomena, but Edmonds carried his investigation beyond a few casual observations. He sat with numerous mediums, closely testing them in every conceivable way in search of the truth.

During January 1851, soon after the death of his wife, Edmonds, who had served in both branches of the New York legislature, for some time as president of the Senate, before he was elevated to the Supreme Court, was persuaded to attend a séance with friends. "I was at the time a disbeliever," he wrote. "I had all my wits about me, and was on the sharp look out for deception,"¹



"My first interview was with the rappings, and three things struck me as remarkable," he wrote. "One was that under the circumstances it was beyond all cavil that the sounds were not produced by the instrumentality of any person present. Another was, that my mental questions

were answered, when I knew that no person present could know what they were, or even that I was asking any; and a third was, that I was directed to correct a mistake I had made in my written memorandum of what was occurring, when I knew that no one present was aware that I had made a mistake, or what it was."²

The mistake, he explained, involved his writing "No one. Not wo." The correction which came through the raps was that it should have been "Number one. Number two."

Very much puzzled after that first séance, Edmonds decided to further investigate. Over the next 23 months he witnessed several hundred manifestations in various forms, keeping very detailed records of them, collecting some 1,600 pages of manuscript. "I went from place to place, seeing different mediums, meeting with different parties of persons; often with persons whom I had never seen before, and sometimes where I was myself entirely unknown, sometimes in the dark and sometimes in the light; often with inveterate unbelievers, and more frequently with zealous believers," he wrote of his investigation. "In fine, I availed myself of every opportunity that was afforded, thoroughly to sift the matter to the bottom. I was all this time an unbeliever, and tried the patience of believers sorely by my skepticism, my captiousness, and my obdurate refusal to yield to belief."³

Edmonds witnessed manifestations of almost every known form, both physical and mental. He observed a mahogany table with a lamp burning on it levitated at least a foot off the floor. He also observed a mahogany chair thrown on its side and moved swiftly back and forth on the floor with no one touching it. It repeatedly stopped abruptly within a few inches of him. It

was on the 21st of May, 1851 that he witnessed the most amazing physical phenomena at the home of Charles Partridge. "For three hours I there witnessed physical manifestations which demonstrated to me beyond all doubt that they were not produced by mortal hands, and were governed by intelligence out of and beyond those present," he wrote. "It is vain for any one to say we were deceived. I knew that I was not, and so did every one of that large party. So it is vain to say the mediums did it, for they were actually more frightened at what occurred than we were, who were spectators, and essayed in vain to stop it. Then it was that the chair run back and forth on the floor, the bell was rung over our heads, and one of the party was forcibly torn by an invisible power from my grasp, in spite alike of his strength, and mine."⁴

Veridical cognitive messages further convinced Edmonds that there was a high order of intelligence involved – "an intelligence outside of, and beyond, more mortal agency; for there was no other hypothesis which I could devise or hear of, that could at all explain that, whose reality is established by the testimony of tens of thousands, and can easily be ascertained by any one who will take the trouble to inquire."⁵

But it was Edmond's daughter, Laura, who really had the gift. She developed into a trance medium. Edmonds explained that although she knew only English and a smattering of French in her awakened state, she spoke Spanish, French, Greek, Italian, Portuguese, Latin, Hungarian, and Indian dialects fluently when entranced (or rather the spirits spoke the languages using her voice mechanism). On one occasion a Greek named Evangelides, a stranger, visited Edmonds and his daughter. He spoke to Laura in Greek and she responded in Greek. "In the course of the conversation he seemed greatly affected, and even shed tears," Edmonds wrote. "The invisible personality with whom he was speaking, with Laura as an intermediary, said that he was an intimate friend, who had died in Greece, the brother of the Greek Marco Bozarris. This friend informed Evange-

lides of the death of his (Evangelides's) son, who had strayed in Greece and had been in excellent health when his father left for America." Ten days later, Evangelides informed Edmonds and his daughter that he had just received a letter telling him of the death of his son.

"It would be vain to contend that it was the reflection of our own thoughts," Edmonds wrote. "We had never seen this man; he had been introduced to us by a friend on that very evening. Moreover even supposing that our minds could have transmitted to him the idea that his son was dead, how could our thoughts have made Laura understand and speak Greek, a language which she had never heard?"⁶

On another occasion, a Mr. E. D. Green, an artist of his city, came for a sitting with his daughter accompanied by an acquaintance from Greece. While the man from Greece spoke entirely in Greek for more than an hour, the replies coming through Laura in both Greek and English.

Edmonds also told the story of a woman from Paisley, Scotland, the grandmother of one of the members of their circle who had come to the United States a year earlier. Speaking through Miss Scongall, a young medium from Rockfort, Illinois, who knew no Scotch, the grandmother announced her death, speaking in her usual dialect and giving various details as to the house she had been living in prior to her death. To confirm that it was indeed his grandmother, the grandson put various questions to his grandmother. "The young man's conviction was so absolute that he wrote at once to his friends in Scotland and informed them of his grandmother's death, taking care to indicate the source of his information." Edmonds recorded. "The letters which he afterward received confirmed the news fully."⁷

Early in 1852, Edmonds met George T. Dexter, a New York physician, who, like Edmonds, had begun as a doubter, then had become a believer, and then a medium himself. Edmonds, Dexter, and several others formed a circle that met on a regular basis and received frequent es-

says purportedly coming from the spirits of Emanuel Swedenborg and Francis Bacon through the hand of Dexter.

When Edmonds went public with his findings, he was attacked by the press, the pulpit, and politicians, and he was forced to resign his position on the Bench and return to the practice of law. One of the more sympathetic articles appeared in the *New York Evening Mirror* during 1853, reading: "John W. Edmonds, the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court of this District, is an able lawyer, an industrious judge, and a good citizen. For the last eight years, occupying without interruption the highest judicial station, whatever may be his faults, no one can justly accuse him of a lack of ability, industry, honesty, or fearlessness. No one can doubt his general saneness, or can believe for a moment that the ordinary operations of his mind are not as rapid, accurate, and reliable as ever."⁸

Edmonds wrote that he knew what he was in for when he made his views public, but he was compelled to do it. "I went into the investigation thinking it a deception, and intending to make public my exposure of it," he explained. "Having, from my researches, come to a different conclusion, I feel that the obligation to make known the result is just as strong. Therefore it is, mainly, that I give the result to the world. I say mainly because there is another consideration which influences me; and that is the desire to extend to others a knowledge which I am conscious can not but make them happier and better."⁹

Edmonds's reputation prompted Governor Nathaniel Tallmadge of the Territory of Wisconsin to undertake his own investigation of mediums. Tallmadge wrote that he had considered the spiritual phenomena he had heard much about as nothing more than a delusion until learning of Edmonds's research. Tallmadge had served with Edmonds in the New York Senate and on the Supreme Court and knew him as a man of "unimpeachable integrity." Thus, he decided it was a subject worthy of investigation.

Tallmadge also became a believer, receiving messages from a number of deceased friends, including John C. Calhoun, former vice-president of the United States. When Tallmadge asked Calhoun about the purpose of the phenomena, Calhoun replied, "It is to draw mankind together in harmony, and convince skeptics of the immortality of the soul."¹⁰

¹ Edmonds, John W., *Spiritualism*, Partridge & Brittan, Publishers, New York, 1853, p. 13

² _____ p. 13

³ Hardinge, Emma, *Modern American Spiritualism*, University Books, 1970 (reprint of 1869 book), p. 96

⁴ Edmonds, p. 25

⁵ Hardinge, P. 98

⁶ Flammarion, Camille, *Death and Its Mystery After Death*, The Century Co., 1923, pp. 326-327

⁷ _____ p. 328

⁸ Hardinge, pp. 99-100.

⁹ _____ p. 99

¹⁰ _____ p. 90