

Maurice Barbanell (1902-1981)

Maurice Barbanell (May 3, 1902 – July 17, 1981) was a London journalist and a trance medium, most remembered as the medium for the entity known as Silver Birch, an apparently advanced spirit who assumed the *persona* of an American Indian guide. Over a period of some five decades, Silver Birch offered several volumes of profound teachings on every conceivable subject related to life, death, and the afterlife through Barbanell at a home circle.



As an example, when Silver Birch was asked whether a soul loses its individuality after it passes through the various spheres and eventually merges with the "Great Spirit," his usual term for God, he responded: "I know of none which as yet reached a stage so perfect that he can be merged into perfection. The more you perfect yourself, the more you find still to be perfected, for you are allowing more of your consciousness to be revealed. Because your consciousness is part of the Great Spirit it is infinite, always stret-

ching out to reach infinity. We know nothing of ultimate perfection."¹

On the subject of death and grief, Silver Birch said: "Death is not a tragedy to those who die; it is only a tragedy to those who are left behind. To go from darkness to light is not something over which you should grieve. If you grieve, you are in reality grieving over your loss and not one who has in truth become enfranchised. He is better off. He will no longer suffer all the ills of the human body. He will not be subjected to the ravages of wasting disease. He will unfold all the gifts with which he has been endowed, and will express them free from any thwartings and will be able to give a larger service to those who require it."²

When asked about Jesus, Silver Birch replied: "The Nazarene is one of the hierarchy behind all the directives we receive when we leave your world occasionally to fortify ourselves to cope with our mission and to glean more of what it is we have to achieve. I have a great reverence for Jesus, the Nazarene, a wondrous example of what the power of the spirit could achieve when divinity assumed human form and gives to those available simple but profound teaching that love is a power that solves all problems when people allow themselves to be animated by it."³

Barbanell was born to Jewish parents, his mother devoutly religious but his father an atheist. Barbanell recalled many disagreements his parents had on the subject of religion. "The years of dissension had the effect of making me first of an atheist and later, in my teens, an agnostic," he wrote. "My outlook was unashamedly materialistic. My ambition was to carve out a successful

commercial career and make a fortune. Fate, however, had other plans.”⁴

In 1931, while serving as secretary of a literary debating society, Barbanell listened to a speaker give a talk on Spiritualism. Very skeptical as to what the speaker had to say, Barbanell decided to investigate by attending some séances. At his second séance, he “fell asleep” and when he awoke he was informed that he had been in a mediumistic trance and that an Indian spirit guide has spoken through him.

It is unclear as to how the mediumship of Barbanell unfolded, but he soon formed a circle that met regularly to hear from Silver Birch. At some point, Hannen Swaffer, a Fleet Street journalist, began hosting the circles. Barbanell’s identity as the medium for Silver Birch was kept a secret for many years as he feared it would compromise his standing as a journalist. He founded *Psychic News* in 1932 and frequently published the teachings of Silver Birch as they were recorded in the circle. It was not until many years later that Barbanell was identified as the medium of Silver Birch.

“Silver Birch, as we call him, is not a Red Indian,” Swaffer explained. “Who he is, we do not know. We assume that he uses the name of the spirit through whose astral body he expresses himself, it being impossible for the high vibration of the spiritual realm to which he belongs to manifest except through some other instrument.”⁵

At one sitting, Silver Birch responded to a question about his identity by saying he was not a Red Indian. “I am using the astral body of a Red Indian because this particular one had many psychic gifts on earth and therefore became available for me when I was asked to return and engage on this mission,” he explained. “My life on earth goes back as an individual much further than the Red Indian I use to speak to you.”

The communicating entity further explained that Silver Birch was his medium on that side, just as Barbanell was the medium in the world of those in attendance. “I had to have what

in your world would be a transformer, someone through whom the vibrations can be stepped up or slowed down so that I can achieve communication on your level.”

The entity stressed that who he was in the earth life made no difference and no one would be able to prove it one way or the other. He asked to be judged solely on what he had to say. He added that his knowledge comes from the infinite source and streams through countless beings, “each charged with particular tasks to ensure that as much of its purity and pristine beauty should be preserved. There is a great host of beings, ranging from what you might call the masters. They are beyond such descriptions.”⁶

Barbanell became one of Spiritualism’s greatest advocates, lecturing frequently, while continuing to investigate many other mediums and writing about his observations. “Now, after thirty-seven years, I still regard myself as an investigator,” he wrote in his 1959 book, *This is Spiritualism*, in which he discusses the mediumship of Gladys Osborne Leonard, Estelle Roberts, Helen Hughes, Helen Duncan, Geraldine Cummins and many others he had had the opportunity to meet, interview, and observe. “I am familiar with all the alternatives offered as explanations of mediumship. Sometimes I think I could make a better case than the critics. Again and again, I have tried to find normal explanations for the phenomena I have witnessed. It has always been my criterion that no supernormal theory should be accepted if a normal one will fit all the facts.”

He mentioned that he had received the same spirit messages through different mediums, and it was clear to him that none of the mediums could have known what had transpired at the other séances. At the same time, he encountered charlatans. “I have met fraud, both willful and unconscious,” he wrote. “I think I can say that I have exposed more charlatans in this field than any other person. My ability to unmask the trickster has been due to the fact that I have witnessed

so many genuine phenomena that I was able to recognize the counterfeit.”

Nevertheless, Barbanell concluded that the amount of fraud in mediumship had been greatly exaggerated. This was due in great part to the fact that newspapers would publicize the tricksters and ignore all the genuine mediums.

“The evidence reveals that man, after death, is a conscious, intelligent, reasoning being, possessing memory, friendship, affection, and love, and with the ability, given the right conditions, to guide loved ones left behind,” he concluded the 1959 book. “So far as I can see, every type of evidence that would establish human identity has been demonstrated. It shows that man persists as an individual with the traits, characteristics and idiosyncrasies that make one person different from everybody else.”⁷

Barbanell authored a number of other books, including, *The Trumpet Shall Sound* (1933), *Across the Gulf* (1940), and *He Walks in Two Worlds*

(1964), but his greatest contribution is no doubt the wisdom of Silver Birch, which was compiled and set forth in at least 12 books by others. The words of Silver Birch are considered by many to offer the most comforting, realistic, and inspirational philosophy available anywhere.

“I see so many in your world, frantic, despairing, not knowing where to turn, rushing hither and thither with no time to spare because so many ‘important’ things have to be done, and yet the most important of all is neglected and overlooked,” Silver Birch said at one sitting. “Is not this the lesson of all our teaching? Is not this the purpose behind the return of every being from our world, so that you should derive from your lives the joy, the satisfaction that should be yours as children of the Great Spirit?”⁸

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¹ Ballard Stan A. and Green, Roger, *The Silver Birch Book of Questions & Answers*, Spiritual Truth Press, 1998, p. 41.

² Naylor, William, *Silver Birch Anthology*, Spiritualist Press, 1955, p. 96.

³ Ballard, p. 4.

⁴ Barbanell, Maurice, *This is Spiritualism*, Herbert Jenkins Ltd., 1959, p. 5.

⁵ Austen, A.W., *Teachings of Silver Birch*, The Spiritual Truth Press, 1998, p. v.

⁶ Ortzen, Tony, *More Philosophy of Silver Birch*, The Spiritual Truth Press, 1979, pp. 9-11.

⁷ Barbanell, p. 203.

⁸ Naylor, p. 37.