



Arthur Moses
Houdini Speaks Out
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Houdini slides, 49 out of 50 in the Library of Congress

REVIEW: *HOUDINI SPEAKS OUT*

Mervyn Heard

ARTHUR MOSES IS ONE OF THE WORLD'S LEADING AUTHORITIES on Harry Houdini (1874–1926), the American magician, escape artist, hero of silent films and one of the most iconic figures of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Moses is also an avid collector, having amassed thousands of items of 'Houdiniana' since his fascination began at an early age. One of his most treasured possessions is a part-complete set of 50 lantern slides which Houdini used in public theatres in his efforts to expose the work of fraudulent mediums. Drawing on three other more complete existing sets held in private collections and public archives, together with Houdini's own lecture notes, Moses has produced his fascinating new book, *Houdini Speaks Out*.

Houdini usually presented the lantern images by way of a preamble to a stage performance featuring practical demonstrations of bogus spirit-raising activity and routine magic. This particular act was developed towards the end of his career, just prior to his untimely death from peritonitis, aggravated by a blow to the stomach.

Houdini had been drawn towards spiritualism in the early 1920s following the death of his beloved mother, Cecilia. Houdini was never an out-and-out sceptic: his greatest desire was to prove that spirit contact was possible and so reunite him with his mother. But his knowledge of conjuring tricks and showmanship only served to convince him that such activity was only simple trickery. He began to introduce examples of fraudulent spiritualist activity into his stage performances and was, in due course, invited to become a member of a special committee set up by the *Scientific American*, which offered a cash prize to anyone who could successfully prove to the group their supernatural abilities. The prize was never won.

During the early 1920s Houdini met Arthur Conan Doyle, the creator of Sherlock Holmes. Doyle, whose wife was a practising medium, was a fervent believer in supernatural activity. The celebrated author had also recently acquired a belief in fairies. He had become convinced of their existence after attending a lantern lecture where the photographic images of the famously fraudulent 'Cottingley fairies' had been screened. To Doyle these images offered proof of the existence of strange elemental forces and, together with his 'evidence' in support of spiritualism, formed the basis of his own lantern lecture in support of these beliefs. He lectured widely and eventually travelled to the United States where he met Houdini. To begin with their relationship was a warm one, in part because Doyle failed to accept that Houdini was (as the performer himself claimed) merely a magician, and was not in fact possessed of hidden supernatural powers. In time their relationship soured, especially when Houdini accused Doyle's wife of being a fraud. Whether Doyle's use of the lantern directly encouraged Houdini to adopt opposing lantern material is unclear, but possible.

There are five known duplicate sets and substantial part sets of Houdini's slides. The only set in the public domain is in the Library of Congress and contains 49 of the 50 images. The sets were published by a leading American manufacturer of educational lantern slide material, The Standard Slide Company, based in New York City. Duplicate sets may have been intended as spares, used independently by some of Houdini's colleagues or even sold commercially. However, there is no direct evidence of this last proposition, and if it were the case one might expect the discovery of more complete or part copies of sets.

So, what in essence is the appeal of this book? Who will want to own it?

There is no doubt that other 'Houdiniasts' – and I am reliably informed there are many of them – will want a copy. Aside from the precise subject matter there is a lengthy introductory essay decorated with colourful, high quality reprints of playbills and other promotional material from the author's collection. The text also offers a fresh perspective on Houdini's work, focusing on the field of spiritualism, as opposed to Houdini's more familiar activities as a magician and escapologist. Indeed, I am sure that most historians of conjuring and the allied arts are far more likely to savour this section of the book than the parts of the book devoted to the slides. These images comprise, for the most part, a portrait gallery of leading fraudsters and other figures. Unfortunately the more interesting images, which reveal actual fraudulent techniques, are very few in number. No doubt this is because the lecture was intended merely as a prelude to Houdini's actual demonstrations.

To the lantern aficionado this book may seem to hold only passing interest. However most will acknowledge that it is rare to find such bespoke lantern material presented in this way, complete with the presenter's own (albeit brief) lecture notes. The fact that Houdini was such a prominent and popular public figure also adds an increased measure of importance to the material and to our view of lantern lecturing to a mass audience in the third decade of the 20th century.

Arthur Moses has his own website, www.houdinispeaksout.com, where there are examples of lantern images together with more information on the author himself, along with an excerpt from the book.