

King could have continued his life as a public servant as well. In 1900, he was named a deputy minister at the impossible age of twenty-six, and he could have carried on — perhaps changing the face of the bureaucracy as a result. Or he could have become a practising lawyer. He earned his degree at the University of Toronto but never qualified to stand at the bar. With the legal training plus his later experience as a labour negotiator and consultant to the Rockefellers, he certainly could have put his talents to use in a stimulating and financially rewarding career. Of course, he could have opted for the academy. He earned a doctorate from Harvard in 1909 (the only prime minister to have one until Mark Carney took office in March) and turned down multiple job offers before confining himself in Ottawa. As in journalism, bureaucracy, and law, King would have climbed institutional rungs and installed himself as the president of the university of his choice. Perhaps he could have joined the clergy? King was an ardent believer and daily reader of the Bible — a man convinced that God had chosen his destiny. He could be preachy.

Instead King chose the most unpredictable profession of all, trusting that his fate was to enter Canadian politics so as to save the

country from whatever disasters could visit its shores — and from the Conservative Party. He ran for a seat in Parliament in 1908, representing Waterloo North, and served as the country's first labour minister. He was defeated in the 1911 election. Undaunted, he ran in a Toronto riding in 1917 and was again beaten. It was a harrowing year in which he also lost his mother. He was feeling sick and aimless, but he had money and independence. He was not married and had no children.

At forty-three, he had to make a choice and decided to stick with politics and live up to his mother's hopes that he become the prime minister. In 1919, shortly after winning the Liberal Party leadership, he searched for spiritualists and had a session. It would be the first of 130 such encounters with mediums of all sorts, as well as fortune tellers, palmists, astrologers, graphologists, phrenologists, and psychic investigators, that King recorded in his diary (and there may have been others) over the next thirty years, about one every three months, right until his death in 1950. This was not a passing interest, contrary to what many have believed (including me).

Wagner divides his admirably exhaustive exploration of King and his spirit world in two. The first volume sets a broad context for

King and his psychic pursuits, offering chapters on a variety of subjects, not least on the widespread popularity of spiritualism in the United Kingdom. It also explores King's obsession with magnetic and electric "sex currents." For King, these were evidence that outside forces were trying to control him, and he confided in his diary that he was often sexually aroused when speaking to large crowds. The second volume explores in commendable detail King's particular interactions with a wide range of mediums — all women, as it turned out.

Wagner reveals King as a lonely man. He was on a pilgrimage, searching for God, eagerly trying to discern providential clues. He saw them in the alignment of the clock's hands, visions perceived in a perfect sphere, the lines etched in his palms, astrology, or a chance reading in a random book excerpt. King was also looking for personal reassurance: the trust of his friends, members of his cabinet, or his caucus was not enough.

Two things are clear. The first is that King took the trouble to journal impressions that could have been very common to anyone. Most of us love our mothers and think of them kindly; we just don't write that down. The second is the absence of evidence that King ever changed his mind as a result of his psychic encounters or that his government's policies shifted course because of the advice he heard from the other world.

Wagner describes the scene when, during a séance in October 1945, the PM asked his departed friend Franklin D. Roosevelt whether nuclear secrets should be shared with the Russians and also requested advice on a wide variety of domestic matters. What is striking is that no answer from "beyond" was secured other than that the subject would be raised at an upcoming lunch.

In fact, King was more often than not disappointed by what he heard. This can hardly be surprising: the people who served his wishes were talking to the same people he knew and were reading the same newspapers. His mediums clearly took pity on him (they also took his money, as Wagner shows) and quietly encouraged him. Yes, he was on the right track; yes, the deceased people he loved and admired thought he was doing a good job. Few of us can exist without support for long; it's just that King needed additional doses of reaffirmation from beyond, roughly every season.

In an age when tolerance for such eccentricities was perhaps diminished, King's habits may have been frowned upon. As Wagner explains, Canada was never a very fertile territory for the sort of spiritualism the prime minister engaged in. Fifty years ago, the estimable scholar Reg Whitaker was given special permission to consult King's diaries and came away convinced that he was "quite crazy." H. S. Ferns, the British author who had worked for King in the early years of the Second World War, declared him "foolish and childish." Even the popular journalist Pierre Berton told a national television audience in 1978 that King was "a certifiable nut." People who worked for King also often resented his manner, describing him as essentially soulless.

As we enter the second quarter of the twenty-first century, when polls show that roughly half of adults believe in ghosts and spirits, King's sincere spirituality should be greeted with sympathy and, perhaps, a bit more understanding. ▲

### "Trancelating" the Verses of Agnes Fong (Lucero): (XXXII)

(pace Agnes Fong)

Fireworks?

Wheel spokes without hubcaps  
blossom against black wind

til they dissolve instantly,  
sucked into nether ether,  
so that the airy flames

dissipate like flares,  
just as my hopes flag  
and thought winks out....

While fireworks drooled  
unspooled, swirling light,  
the stars diffused

cold, frigid solitude,  
and that's what remained  
after dark breezes defused

the hot, bleeding tendrils  
that had inflamed the night  
so incandescently,

so transiently,  
only to leave the blackest eve  
transcendent....

(5 janvier *mmxxii*)

George Elliott Clarke

*George Elliott Clarke teaches African Canadian literature at the University of Toronto. His "trancelation" of the Sino-Cuban poet Agnes Fong (Lucero) is a sidereal misreading of her original text due to his confessed ignorance of Spanish.*