

CHICO XAVIER: MEDIUM OF THE CENTURY by Guy Lyon Playfair. London: Roundtable Publishing (International Spiritist Council), 2010. Pp. 98. £6.99 [approximately \$11.33] (paperback). ISBN 978-0-956449-31-3

Francisco Candido (Chico) Xavier (1910–2002), the most famous and influential medium in Brazil’s history, has been celebrated in his homeland in a number of ways. He was named “The Minas Citizen of the

20th Century,” beating even arguably the best soccer player in history, Pelé, and a special postage stamp, two feature films (there are also previous documentaries), and former president Fernando Henrique Cardoso also honored his life. In this slim book, Guy Lyon Playfair calls Chico Xavier the medium of the century and introduces him and his work to the English-speaking public. This lofty claim for a century that also produced the likes of Mrs. Piper, Mrs. Leonard, Eileen Garrett, and other extraordinary mediums is based on Xavier’s automatic writing of hundreds of books and the apparently anomalous information he conveyed to many people. Also, although this would not qualify him as a great medium but definitely as a great person, reference is made in the book to his having helped millions of people through projects to help disadvantaged youth, leprosy patients, and others, funded with the money from his publications.

Xavier said that his automatic writing came from various sources, including many dead Brazilian poets and scientists. Playfair makes the case that he could not possibly have had the knowledge or linguistic ability himself to produce this vast oeuvre and that the quality of the material thus produced cannot be explained in ordinary ways. At one point, he hyperbolically equates one of the plots of Xavier’s books to “any Greek drama or Rossini opera” (p. 40) although the summary he provides reads like a soap-opera but with actual rather than fake deaths, and reincarnations rather than amnesia-producing accidents. That Chico Xavier’s style, at least in some books, was probably not of very high caliber is suggested by mention of a critic who counted no less than 617 adjectives in 20 pages of a novel (p. 46). Style issues aside, the most important part of this channeled material is the content, which describes the nature of the interaction between matter and spirit and the afterlife, among other lofty subjects. Here I part company with Playfair, who evidently holds in very high regard the material produced. Although, of course, I could be wrong and may be taught otherwise after my death, I found that assertions of an afterlife in which there is food, only of better taste, along with governments, cinemas, and concerts, exemplify the same silliness and denial of death as the recent film version of *The Lovely Bones*, in which a raped and killed teenage girl ends up in a world with a nicer high school without acne or bullies and with gaudier pink colors. Similarly, descriptions of spiritual microbes, corpuscles, and otherworldly genetic engineers somehow affecting reincarnations did not exactly provide me with insight as to what the relationship may be between conscious phenomena and material states, or what survival may be like. Philosophically I also disagree with the messages that sexuality and sensuality are somehow base instincts that prevent spiritual development, or that individuals choose the handicaps with which they will be reborn so as to help them with their development (I just have to wonder what purpose someone stillborn or born with a horrible condition like hydrocephaly would have in inflicting that pain to his/her parents or how that would allow any kind of development).

I imagine that most of the readers of the *JP* will be most interested in the purported psi capabilities of Xavier. Playfair mentions that a number of Spiritists (the religion founded by Allan Kardec which Chico Xavier followed) and a Brazilian parapsychologist did a follow-up of some of the messages purportedly from dead individuals as channeled by Xavier to surviving relatives. The book states that “there was not a single statement that was found to be incorrect” in a session where apparently anomalous communication came through. However, neither specific information on the methodology of this analysis, which of course would require safeguards for the accuracy and impartiality of the evaluations, nor a reference is provided. So on this most interesting of points, the book remains tantalizingly vague.

Finally, some words on the opinions of Guy Lyon Playfair himself: I found that he lacked a critical perspective to evaluate much of the material to which he referred, including the scientific sophistication of Xavier’s discussion of anatomy, embryology, and so on, which struck me as being very possibly the product of someone with very good memory (as Xavier was known to have), some reading of medicine textbooks, along with a generous syncretic serving of “kardecism” and other esoteric traditions. Playfair also summarily dismisses any nonanomalous alternative explanations. For example, he writes that a nephew of Xavier asserted that the latter was consciously the author of the materials and that he had always had a facility to copy the literary styles of others. This is a reasonable hypothesis, yet Playfair dismisses it with “no allegation could have been more absurd” and states that no shred of evidence was offered for it, yet produces what sound like farfetched and ungrounded charges for the nephew’s accusation: his “hoping to impress a Catholic girl friend, or ... [being] bribed by a local priest” (p. 30). Playfair also mentions as somewhat premonitory the fact that Chico Xavier wrote of psychic surgery in 1954 before “anyone” had heard of the famous psychic surgeon Arigó, yet the latter started practicing somewhere around 1950. He also makes simple mistakes such as stating in perfect present tense that Xavier “has never married” (p. 68), something that Playfair likely wrote earlier but that is no longer applicable unless he is somehow in contact with the still single spirit of Xavier.

But what I found most grating about Playfair was what I would characterize as his condescension to both Brazil and those not having had much formal education. He repeatedly states that an elementary student dropout could not have produced the material that Chico Xavier did, dismissing the fact that some of the best literature in the world (the reader need only consider Homer—or the oral tradition covered by that name—and Shakespeare) has been produced by exceptional individuals without much formal education. As to the assertion that Xavier’s near blindness would prevent him from reading or writing, I offer not only John Milton but also, closer to Brazil, perhaps the best short story writer of the second half of the 20th century, Jorge Luis Borges.

With regard to Brazil, Playfair underlines how bad its elementary school system must have been at the time of Xavier's upbringing without offering any evidence that it was actually as bad as or worse than, say, the school system in the UK. Having grown up in México and visited many countries in the Americas, I would choose not only the street-smarts but also the multilinguistic abilities of a typical Haitian youngster over those of a typical university graduate from a mono-linguistic country any day of the week. Also, to state as Playfair does that the quality of Xavier's writing is typical of what Brazilians want and produce is to disregard writers of international stature in the 20th century such as Guimarães Rosa. Unless, of course, Playfair also means that 20th century English literature could be defined by Danielle Steel, who also happens to be an enormously successful and prolific popular writer...

After having read this introduction to Chico Xavier, I do remain impressed by the amount and apparent facility of his automatic writing, surpassing in quantity even Pearl Curran, the person who wrote the *Patience Worth* material (Prince, 1927/1964), but I remain skeptical as to its literary quality and evidential importance for survival. The reference to Xavier's psi abilities is intriguing but would require far more information than that provided in this book. Also, at the end of the book I knew almost nothing about Chico Xavier's life other than his literary output (for instance, who were the important people in his life, and why is there no reference to the discovery of his abilities after his sister was treated with an exorcism, or to other episodes in his life?).

That Xavier displayed an extraordinary proclivity for automatic writing and that he seems to have done it in different styles is remarkable, although not unique. For instance, Fernando Pessoa, arguably the best 20th century Portuguese poet, wrote in markedly different styles according to his various heteronyms or selves, although he did not do so automatically. As to Chico Xavier's marginalization as a writer, I suspect that he was not recognized by the Brazilian literary establishment not because of the apparent provenance of his work but because, judging by the prose samples in the book, he was an articulate and prolific but far from exceptional writer. We not only have the counterexample of Pessoa's enormous recognition in Portugal, but that of James Merrill, whose masterwork *The Changing Light at Sandover*, partly produced with the help of communications obtained through a Ouija board, got him the National Book Critics Circle Award in 1983.

Having become acquainted now with the cases of Chico Xavier and Pearl Curran, I offer an alternative to the anomalous explanation: an overevaluation of the literary and philosophical (and in the case of Xavier also scientific) merits of the work, alongside with an underestimation of ordinary human capabilities. Yes, it is remarkable for most people to be able to write coherently and rapidly without paying much attention to the paper, but is such performance really that different from that of an

experienced jazz musician who can improvise sophisticated riffs while holding a conversation?

Another piece of the puzzle might be found in Pearl Curran's short story "Rosa Alvaro, Entrante," ignored in the otherwise seemingly thorough analysis by Prince (Diliberto, 2010). It is the chronicle of a lonely salesperson who ends up persuading herself of the reality of a spirit guide mentioned by a fortune teller so that she can fully express herself. It may be that, independently of the issue of survival, some people may need to invoke spirits to liberate talents that would otherwise remain hidden; they can then create a new reality for themselves and for others (cf. Cardena & Beard, 1996). Although I was not persuaded that Chico Xavier was the medium of the century, Playfair makes a good case that he must have been a genial and enormously altruistic person, and that is always worth celebrating.

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