Constantine B. Sanders: The Sleeping Preacher of North Alabama

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My long quest had finally ended in the quiet solitude of the little community cemetery in Stevenson, Alabama. Facing me, at the extreme western edge of the grounds, was the gravestone which told the simple story:

Rev. C. B. Sanders  
Born July 2, 1831  
Died Apr. 14, 1911

How incongruous, I thought, as I stood there in quiet respect. To think, that all his dreams, hopes, and life were summed up in the simple epitaph: he was born and he died. As my thoughts tumbled back across the years, I was aware that his final resting place, on a softly rolling hillside, was in marked contrast to the mental and emotional turbulence, which had so often painfully wracked his gentle nature.

Constantine Blackman Sanders, the son of James and Rebecca Sanders, was born about sixteen miles north of Huntsville. The younger of two sons in a family which included eight sisters, he suffered an emotional shock at age six when his father died. Thereafter, he was particularly close to his mother, and remained on the farm with her until young manhood. By nature susceptible to her strong religious
influence, he regularly attended community protracted meetings and revivals. On September 5, 1851, he was converted in a revival held about twelve miles north of Huntsville, and joined the Cumberland Presbyterian Church the next day.  

In 1854, recognizing his need for some kind of formal education to prepare for his chosen field in the ministry, young Sanders enrolled in a school at Elkton in Giles County, Tennessee, about twenty-five miles northwest of Huntsville. While away at school that summer, he was stricken with typhoid fever, and experienced periods of convulsions in his entire system, especially in his arms, chest, throat, and tongue. On one occasion while he was in considerable pain, he took the hand of Mrs. A. M. Harlow, his landlady, and placed it to his forehead. To her amazement, Mrs. Harlow felt what appeared to be a separation of the skull into which she could almost place her little finger. This unusual depression extended from about the center of Sanders’ forehead to the top of his head, then down towards each ear. Mrs. Harlow observed that when the paroxysms subsided, the depressions would nearly close up. Sometime during this illness, Sanders told Mrs. Harlow that there would be a burial at her home the following day. About an hour after this remark was made, a man arrived at the house to ask her permission to bury a body in the family cemetery. 

Thus, young Constantine Blackman Sanders experienced his first known contact with that mysterious secondary personality, which assumed the title $X+Y=Z$. During the next twenty-two years this unusual psychic phenomena occurred to him under a variety of circumstances, in numerous places, and at different times day or night. The attacks took place wherever Sanders might be and in the presence
of any number of people. His religious faith, resting as it did upon fundamental teachings of the Bible, regarded anything associated with spiritualism as either a Satanic force or religious cult. This uncontrollable malady, therefore, brought personal embarrassment to Sanders in his ministerial office. In fact, he was so insecure over his condition that if he was unsure of a person's friendship, it quickly crossed his mind that the individual might be thinking of him as an "arrant humbug." When preaching, he was usually plagued with thoughts that his audience regarded him as hypocrite or pretender.

There is little recorded information about Sanders' activities between 1854 and 1876. Evidence indicates that he rarely, if ever, ventured more than fifty miles from his birthplace. On October 29, 1856, he married Miss Duanna A. White, also of Madison County. This was a fortunate marriage for him, because his wife's nature made her adaptable to providing the kind of constant, uncomplaining care which he needed during his psychic attacks. The Federal Census of 1860 listed the young couple and their two children, Alice and William, at the Hayes Store post office in Madison County, near the Tennessee line. They owned no real estate, and their personal estate was valued at only $450. Sanders was ordained into the full ministry in 1862. He held a brief pastorate in Meridianville, Alabama, from 1866 to 1867. In 1869, he moved to Maysville, about eight miles east of Huntsville. Interestingly, although he pastored there until 1876, he appeared in the Federal Census for 1870 in Brownsboro, three miles south of Maysville. By then his family included two more additions, Walter and Veulah, but his personal estate was down to $400.

During this time the mysterious second nature
X+Y=Z was a frequent visitor to Sanders' consciousness, coming often as a thief in the night. Following his initial attack in 1854, Sanders regularly endured excruciating headaches and body cramps which would contort his physical frame. Associated with the headaches were "violent lancinating pains in the chest," which sharply reduced his respiration. It was common for his eyes to be overtaxed with blood, which, because of the intense pressure, sometimes trickled down his cheeks in droplets. These periods of suffering were usually accompanied by a condition of "sleep." As he "slept" Sanders apparently could "see" events that were transpiring elsewhere with no consideration of time or place.

One account attempted to explain this condition as a "cerebral disturbance a superexcitation... of the sensorium that pushes his mind or soul free and untrammelled into space, and thus, uninfluenced by surrounding objects, it sees clearly all things happening around."7

On other occasions while under his psychic spell, Sanders would write down whatever he "saw" transpiring. In 1874, he recorded the outline of a sermon delivered by Dr. F. A. Ross one night in Huntsville twelve miles away.8 Dr. Thaddeus C. Blake, an editor of "The Cumberland Presbyterian," told of an incident which also occurred about 1874 at his home in Nashville. It seems that Mrs. Blake had misplaced a ring which belonged to her daughter, who was quite upset over the loss. At breakfast one morning, Dr. Blake, knowing that the Negro cook was superstitious, mentioned in her presence that he planned to write Sanders to see if he could locate the ring. After a brief period of silence, the cook told her son to look under the window where Mrs. Blake often sat. There the ring was found. Dr. Blake met

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Sanders the following week in Madison County and started to discuss the incident with him. Whereupon, Sanders interrupted to complete the story and even described the inscription on the ring. He added that the entire transaction was written down while he was in a trance.⁹

Thus, X+Y=Z came and went during the course of twenty-two years. In time, Sanders became somewhat reconciled to his condition and was able to regard his companion as a friend rather than an adversary. His ability to do this resulted in part from the fact that X+Y=Z revealed himself to be spiritually devout and theologically sound.¹⁰ Sanders' personal cross was made even lighter by the confidence which his denomination and local churches placed in him. In fact, his congregation in Maysville felt so strongly about retaining him as pastor in 1876, that the elders and deacons drew up a resolution affirming their confidence in his "integrity, veracity, and piety."

But regardless of his growing awareness that he and X+Y=Z could cohabit the conscious reaches of his mind, the presence of this mysterious psychic force kept the world of C. B. Sanders extremely small. One can only conjecture at this point, of course. But it seems from the few fragments of records which have been preserved, that Sanders sought companionship only with those whose friendship was unquestioned. Had Sanders lived in a more materialistic era and been less fundamental in his Christian faith, it is conceivable that considerable wealth and notoriety would have devolved upon him because of his condition. But in that day his theological and personal inhibitions did not permit such a radical step. So he unassumingly lived and labored on in the highways and hedges of Madison County.
ever apprehensive that his story might someday leak out to an unfriendly world, which might treat his case with human cruelty and misunderstanding.

Mooresville in Limestone County was one place where Sanders knew he was among friends, the chief one being Dr. W. T. Thach with whom he became acquainted about 1860. There is some disagreement over whether or not he ever held a full-time pastorate there, although it is known that he held numerous revivals in the community. Perhaps he also was a supply pastor from time to time. In Mooresville today, tall, stately trees still tower above old homes which bespeak a vanishing charm and elegance of another day, when life was tender and gentle in meaning. Perhaps it was this opportunity to find quiet refuge that caused C. B. Sanders to turn toward Mooresville and his friend, Dr. Thach.12

Ironically, it was in Mooresville that Sanders was first publicly exposed. In September, 1875, the Nashville Daily American, having heard about him, prepared a lengthy article on the subject. Referring to him simply as the "Sleeping Preacher," the article cited Sanders as an "humble minister of the Cumberland Presbyterian Church," who could, if he wished, "produce a number one sensation as a spiritualist."13 The article was largely concerned with a report by a Williamson County, Tennessee, Cumberland Presbyterian minister, who had recently heard Sanders preach in a protracted meeting in Mooresville. One evening after the service the unidentified minister was notified by Dr. Thach that Sanders, who was staying in his home, had lapsed into a trance. Arriving at the house, the minister found Sanders sitting in a rocking chair in the parlor, his eyes closed and head resting against the back of the chair. In a low semi-tone voice, he was

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A sketch of Reverend Sanders made from a photograph taken in 1876 by C.C. Giers of Nashville, Tennessee, while the minister was in one of his trances.

Imposing gravestone to the memory of Reverend and Mrs. C. B. Sanders in the family burial site in Stevenson, Alabama.
singing a hymn which reminded the minister of "angels whispers" with a "tone of inexpressible melancholy about it that reached the heart of every one present." An earnest, piteous prayer preceded a sermon which Sanders based on the Thirteenth Chapter of First Corinthians. The address, the minister stated, seemed to fall "as gentle and pure as the snow. To say that it was eloquent does not express it. It was simply glorious, chaste and intellectual."14

This article, although it avoided sensationalism, and another one which appeared in the Cincinnati Tribune on November 26, made Sanders heartsick. Now the X+Y=Z secret was out! He abhorred the glaring notoriety and undesirable publicity which was being distributed by curiosity-seekers who came to the neighborhood. To set the record straight, Sanders asked the Reverend George Washington Mitchell, pastor of the Cumberland Presbyterian Church in Athens, to document his story. The Reverend Mitchell, known as a venerable churchman, compiled his information from living witnesses who were regarded as unimpeachable in moral and mental resources.15 There were sixty-nine in all from such scattered places as Athens, Brownsboro, Decatur, Hazel Green, Huntsville, Madison, Leighton, Maysville, Meridianville, and Mooresville in Alabama; Elkton, Lebanon, Salem, Nashville, Tullahoma and Winchester in Tennessee; and Montgomery, Virginia. Ten of these persons were clergymen, six were physicians and one was a member of the Alabama Legislature. One contributor, Dr. B. W. McDonnold, was president of Cumberland University. The information which was compiled was published in 1876 as a book entitled X+Y=Z or The Sleeping Preacher of North Alabama.

Since this is not a critical study of the life of C.
B. Sanders, it is probably ludicrous to analyze the documents which Mitchell obtained. But naturally the temptation is there! Insofar as the eye-witnesses were concerned, they all seemed to be thoroughly honest, reputable people. Much of their testimony, however, was drawn from personal recollections, some of it coming many years after the event. Some degree of error, therefore, was inevitable. But in discussing the basic aspects pertaining to Sanders' psychic periods, they were remarkably consistent. All of them agreed that something quite beyond his natural person could possess his spirit, and release his mind to witness unnatural events.

One case which I was able to trace to some extent might be mentioned here. In 1876, the Reverend Mitchell and Dr. J. S. Blair recalled an incident which occurred in 1866 in Mitchell's house in Athens. Sanders, they said, was sitting by a front window in the parlor. Suddenly he assumed a countenance of great sorrow and said: "Poor fellow! What a pity! He is gone, gone, gone!" When questioned as to the cause of his melancholy manifestations, Sanders intoned that "Lieutenant McClure has just died suddenly from an internal hemorrhage near Clarksville, Tennessee." McClure, Mitchell recalled, lived in Athens but was on a quick trip to Tennessee to see his parents. While visiting at the home of a friend, he suddenly began to cough violently and spit blood. He died almost immediately. Word of his demise reached his young wife, the former Pattie Vasser, by telegram early the next morning in Athens. Mitchell thought that the date was either November 1 or 2, 1866. Fortunately, an obituary on McClure was recently found in the Clarksville Weekly Chronicle for November 9, 1866. It stated:
At the residence of Dr. Beaumont, in this county on the 1st inst., of consumption, R. W. McClure, Jr., in the 30th year of his age. Mr. McClure was born and raised in the community and was highly esteemed for his noble traits of character. He was a worthy member of the gallant 14th Tenn. Regiment, and remained a true soldier throughout the war. 17

Walter Franklin Prince of the Boston Society for psychic Research analyzed this particular case in 1929. Relying entirely on the Mitchell and Blair accounts, he stressed that there was not any expectation of death for young McClure. Had death been imminent, Prince believed, McClure would not have been out of town alone on a visit. At this distant date, probably no one will ever know why McClure was in Clarksville. It is interesting to note, however, that the newspaper account places his death at the home of Dr. Beaumont. The question which naturally arises is what was he doing at the residence of a physician. Perhaps the hurried trip to Clarksville was necessitated by McClure's rapidly deteriorating physical condition with consumption, instead of a mere pleasure visit. Dr. Beaumont may have been a long-trusted family physician, to whom McClure turned as a last resort. 18

On February 2, 1876, Sanders was probably surprised to learn that his ubiquitous companion had addressed a letter to him, consenting to leave for an indefinite period. This proposed departure apparently came about because X+Y=Z was convinced that Sanders wanted to be freed from what seemed to him to be a burden. On May 5, X+Y=Z bade farewell in the following way:
My Casket, I now come to address you, personally, before I depart. You have been to me greatly a submissive servant, in suffering, in contempt, in wonder, in reproach, by night and by day, from year to year past... You can never fully see all you have passed in this life until you see the life to come... I have given you many valuable lessons, and prevented you from many difficulties and sorrows... With Heaven's benediction I will now bid you adieu. 19

Apparently X+Y=Z kept his word. From May 5 until Mitchell's book was published four months later, Sanders did not experience any lapses into his previous psychic state. With the exception of some headaches and trouble in his chest, he was living a normal life for the first time in twenty-two years. After a brief melancholy period, his countenance had changed, and his spirits risen as he adjusted to his new condition. On one occasion, upon awakening from sleep, he realized that he had dreamed for the first time since the inception of his peculiar spells. 20

The whereabouts of Constantine Blackman Sanders after the departure of X+Y=Z are difficult to trace. Efforts to locate original manuscripts written during and following his experience thus far have been futile. Important church minute books have vanished along with the congregations of the little rural churches which he was known to pastor. The records of the Tennessee Presbytery for 1886-1890 contain only inconsequential references to Sanders when he attended meetings or served on a committee. After 1906, when many Cumberlands rejoined the Presbyterian Church U.S.A., he was no longer listed in the Cumberland Presbyterian records. He was not found again until 1912 when his necrology appeared in the General Assembly Minutes of the
Presbyterian Church U.S.A. The place of his death was Stevenson, Alabama.

So it was to Stevenson I went, hardly knowing what to expect for my effort. But I found him there resting quietly among friends and loved ones of another day. As I looked long moments upon the noble monument erected to his memory, I could not help but muse over the place where they had placed him. It was on the edge of the grounds, almost set apart from the others who reposed there. In a way it seemed to me that this was where he always found himself - on the outside of humanity. But just beyond those shadows I saw a magnificent sunset, dropping brilliantly in the western sky. And then I felt that Constantine Blackman Sanders was at rest after all.

1An article in the Nashville, Tennessee, Daily American expressed the belief that there must have been a predisposition toward cerebral disorders in Sanders' family background. September 15, 1875, 4.


3Ibid., 25. In 1876, Mrs. Harlow claimed that the death occurred about 25 miles from her house, making it practically impossible for Sanders to know of the sickness or death of the man. Mitchell is apparently in error when he refers to Mrs. Harlow as being a widow in 1854. The 1860 Federal Census for Giles County listed an Allen M. Harlow, a forty-year-old farmer, still living with his wife, Mary, and their children. The article in American also contradicts Mitchell's account of Sanders' bout with typhoid fever. The American said that it occurred after his marriage to Duanna White, in 1856.
Walter Franklin Prince, "Two Old Cases Reviewed," Bulletin No. 11 (Boston Society for Psychic Research, 1929), 50-1. Generally, Americans of that period were skeptical of psychic phenomena, which was well known in pre-literate societies and Oriental and Occidental cultures. A strong reason for this was the influence of the Judeo-Christian religions, which rejected any forms of spiritualism.

Mitchell, op. cit., 44-5.

There is little left today of either Maysville or Brownsboro. Mr. Charlie Crowson, an eighty-one-year-old resident of Maysville, told the author on April 27, 1969, that the Cumberland Presbyterian Church stood one block north of the two general merchandise stores, which constitute the business district of Maysville today. He did not recall any local stories about Sanders.

Nashville Daily American, September 15, 1875, 4.

Mitchell, op. cit., 57. The story was verified by the Reverend H. R. Smith of Huntsville, in whose home Sanders visited the next morning. According to the Reverend Smith, Sanders correctly described the sermon with its text, divisions, and main thoughts.

Nashville Daily American, September 15, 1875, 4.

Prince, op. cit., 57. Sanders was greatly relieved when he realized that when he lapsed into his psychic states he often preached and had many converts.

Mitchell, op. cit., 168-69. The resolution was drawn up when Sanders sought to sever his connection with the church because of his condition.

Pat Jones, The Story of Mooresville (North Alabama Historical Association, 1968), 58. This small volume is a compilation of historical articles which Jones wrote while he was city editor of the Huntsville Times, 1931-7. Jones says that during the times Sanders pastored in Mooresville, he lived in...
a cottage across the street from Dr. Thach. Mr. Benajah A. Bibb, with whom the author of this paper talked on April 22, 1969, disputes this claim and says that Sanders never did pastor in Mooresville, although he often visited the town. Mr. Bibb, a resident of Decatur, was postmaster at Mooresville for thirty-five years. The 1880 Federal Census for Limestone County notes that Dr. Thach was suffering from nervous frustration.

13 Page 4.

14 Ibid. At the conclusion of the sermon, Sanders went into a paroxysm which so corrugated his brow that it was possible to place a finger in the depression. Then he lapsed into a peaceful sleep.

15 The Reverend Mitchell was born August 3, 1815, in Maury County, Tennessee, and died April 6, 1904, in Pulaski, Tennessee. He pastored in Athens on two different occasions: 1856-66 and 1873-88. Obituary in The Cumberland Presbyterian, April 14, 1904, 469. For what it might be worth, a memorial to Mitchell at the time of his death by the Reverend T. E. Hudson noted that he (Mitchell) during most of his life was "broken down in health and had to abandon school... he was greatly afflicted, perhaps he never enjoyed a single day of perfect health."


17 Page 3. The obituary item made no mention of McClure's present home being in Athens.

18 Prince, op. cit., 28-31. Mitchell, op. cit., 80, told of a recent letter which he had received from a lady who said she was present at the time of McClure's death. Her name was not mentioned nor was the letter directly quoted. But according to this version, McClure was sitting in her room reading aloud from a book, when he suddenly began to cough violently. She assisted him to a chair where he died immediately.

19 Mitchell, op. cit., 194-96.

16
20 Ibid. 201-202.

21 This information was supplied to me by Professor Hinkley Smartt, Librarian at Memphis Theological Seminary.

22 Individuals who proved so helpful to me in Stevenson were Dr. George Coleman, pastor of the Cumberland Presbyterian Church, Miss Ruth Smith, and Miss Elise Sanders, granddaughter of C. B. Sanders. Miss Sanders directed me to the gravesite of her grandfather.