CAMBRIDGE
Cambridge University Press
0521265053 - The Other World: Spiritualism and Psychical Research in England, 1850-1914
Janet Oppenheim
Excerpt
More information

Introduction

Loss of Christian faith, despite all the volumes that have been devoted to the subject, must always remain fundamentally inaccessible to the historian's probe. The renunciation of particular creeds and rituals may be documented, but the process of ceasing to believe can never be fully chronicled. That the Victorian age was a period of religious uncertainty is beyond question, but the reasons for that doubt are not capable of precise explanation. The onslaughts of reason and science played a part, of course, in what has been called "the secularization of the European mind in the nineteenth century," but they were not alone responsible.[1] Nor was rationalism uniform in its impact and consequences. It prompted some to rethink particular aspects of the biblical narratives without jeopardizing an underlying adherence to Christianity. For others, it demanded not only a repudiation of the Christian religion, but the denial of God's very existence. Still others paid scant attention to the arguments raised by scientific, historical, and biblical scholarship. Faith could fade gradually, less the consequence of logical deduction than a matter of indifference, of changing habits, of new social patterns and economic demands. Yet, whatever the complex relationships of cause and effect, Victorians themselves were fully aware that the place of religion in the cultural fabric of their times was scarcely secure. In an effort to counter that insecurity, to calm their fears, and to seek answers where contemporary churches were ambiguous, thousands of British men and women in the Victorian and Edwardian eras turned to spiritualism and psychical research.

I have purposely imposed geographical and chronological boundaries on this study. Although many similar developments vividly color American and European history of the nineteenth century, there is such a wealth of available material that it seemed sufficient challenge to try to make good sense out of the British evidence alone. It is also true that the strength of the Nonconformist tradition, the intensity of the evangelical experience in Britain, and the particular influence of the Anglican church provided a context for spiritualism and psychical research that was distinct from continental or American varieties. I hope,

© Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
0521265053 - The Other World: Spiritualism and Psychical Research in England, 1850-1914
Janet Oppenheim
Excerpt
More information

nonetheless, that I have remembered to point out from time to time that even England is never truly an island where the exchange of ideas and cultural trends is concerned. I have also excluded from this work people whose interest in spiritualism or psychical research flowered after 1914, not because they were few in number – on the contrary, the Great War substantially enhanced the appeal of psychics and séances – but because the context had changed. The new converts were responding, not to the intellectual and emotional crises of the mid- and late-Victorian decades, but to the unprecedented horrors of World War.

In recognizing the perplexity that many of their contemporaries felt about Christian beliefs, the British spiritualists and psychical researchers before World War I perceived in science the main source of tension. They may have erred in emphasizing so heavily the threat of science, but their extensive writings leave no doubt that, for them, scientific modes of thought posed the outstanding challenge to the foundations of Christianity. It was science in all its manifestations, they believed, that was broadcasting a materialistic philosophy. They opposed that tendency of modern thought with a bold affirmation of spiritualism, the assertion that spirit exists and functions in the universe as surely as matter. Indeed no group of people more zealously threw their energies into the effort to discredit materialism than the men and women who endorsed spiritualism in the second half of the nineteenth century. Their response to the Victorian crisis of faith was vigorous and heartfelt. It was, furthermore, far more representative of contemporary religious attitudes than the agnosticism embraced by the comparatively few intellectuals who have dominated the historical record of that crisis.

It goes without saying that not every person who ever attended a séance in nineteenth-century Britain was seeking to combat materialism. Inevitably, there were participants who played with spiritualism, as they played with other fashionable and passing fads. The impetus behind modern spiritualism came, nevertheless, from the thousands who looked to spiritualism for far more urgent reasons than mere titillation. It came from the men and women who searched for some incontrovertible reassurance of fundamental cosmic order and purpose, especially reassurance that life on earth was not the totality of human existence. While Victorians of a scholarly bent found relief disputing theologically among themselves in the periodical press, spiritualists found their comfort at the séance table. There, in the spirit voices, the spirit hands, faces, and bodies, the messages rapped out on walls, floors, and furniture, or scribbled on slate, spiritualists received proof that the human spirit survives bodily death. With that proof, they lib-

© Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
0521265053 - The Other World: Spiritualism and Psychical Research in England, 1850-1914
Janet Oppenheim
Excerpt
More information

erated themselves from the religious anxiety and emotional bewilderment that had afflicted them and continued to torment countless numbers of their contemporaries.

In the chapters that follow, the terms ''spiritualist'' and ''psychical researcher'' recur repeatedly. They are not intended to be synonymous, for they designate distinct approaches to psychic phenomena. The spiritualists, on the one hand, were likely to attend séances in an accepting frame of mind. Believing, as they firmly did, in human survival after death and in the possible activity of disembodied human spirits, they did not hesitate to assert the reality of communication with the dead and to accept as genuine most of the phenomena that they witnessed at séances. Psychical researchers, on the other hand, trod with greater circumspection and even, in some cases, skepticism. Eager to investigate the allegedly spiritualistic phenomena as exhaustively as possible, they did not consider a critical mind inappropriate in the séance room. They were attracted to the subject, not only because it apparently offered a chance to prove immortality, but also because it presented the opportunity to explore the mysteries of the human mind. In all their investigations, psychical researchers claimed to be gathering information objectively, collecting the facts needed for strict scientific evaluation, and harboring no preconceived explanatory theories. Ironically, some psychical researchers were as eager as the spiritualists to force the methods of science into the service of an unseen, immaterial world. Their work, instead of building on scientific discoveries, misunderstood, misapplied, and distorted them.

No doubt every age in human history has felt the lure of the occult. Ever since science began establishing its claim to epistemological supremacy, there have been people drawn to phenomena that apparently defied rational, scientific explanation. Recent years have been no exception, with psychokinesis, biorhythms, horoscopes, psychic surgery, Kirlian auras, out-of-body experiences, and that supreme example of occult silliness, pyramid power. There is, nonetheless, a significant distinction between spiritualism and psychical research in the late nineteenth century and parapsychology in the late twentieth. Now, after decades of disappointments, few influential or renowned scholars endorse the claims of parapsychology. Then, a century ago, spiritualism and psychical research loomed as very serious business to some very serious and eminent people, such as the Fellows of the Royal Society, university professors, and Nobel prize-winning scientists who supported the Society for Psychical Research. Together with the industrious middle-class professionals and self-educated artisans who joined spiritualist clubs both in London and the provinces, these intellectuals turned to psychic phenomena as courageous pioneers hoping to dis-

© Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
0521265053 - The Other World: Spiritualism and Psychical Research in England, 1850-1914
Janet Oppenheim
Excerpt
More information

cover the most profound secrets of the human condition and of man's place in the universe. With psychology in its infancy, it still seemed in the late nineteenth century that psychical research, if not spiritualism, might play a legitimate and important role in the growth of a new science.

The Victorians and Edwardians who appear in this volume varied greatly in their degrees of credulity. Some greeted the occult crazes of their day with derision, whereas for others nothing evidently taxed too greatly their capacities for belief. None, however, could blandly accept God's absence from the universe. They had not had time to adjust to an amoral world that neither cared about humanity nor made manifest an ultimate meaning in life. If they turned to spiritualism and psychical research as refuge from bleak mechanism, emptiness, and despair, they did so as part of a widespread effort in this period to believe in *something*. Their concerns and aspirations placed them – far from the lunatic fringe of their society – squarely admidst the cultural, intellectual, and emotional moods of the era.

© Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
0521265053 - The Other World: Spiritualism and Psychical Research in England, 1850-1914
Janet Oppenheim
Excerpt
More information

PART I

The setting

© Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE
Cambridge University Press
0521265053 - The Other World: Spiritualism and Psychical Research in England, 1850-1914
Janet Oppenheim
Excerpt
More information

1

Mediums

AMATEURS AND PROFESSIONALS

No study of the spiritualist boom in the second half of the nineteenth century would be complete without the mediums – the men, women, and children who claimed to function as channels of communication between the living and the dead. They attracted thousands to their séances and ensured substantial publicity for spiritualist phenomena. Indeed, there could have been no spiritualist movement whatsoever without these conduits of spirit power, and it is only appropriate to begin an examination of spiritualism and psychical research by first allowing the mediums some time under the spotlight at center stage.

Perhaps the theatrical metaphor is unfair. Certainly a number of mediums were actors, consciously playing roles, purposely deceiving their audiences, and giving public performances worthy of any trained thespian. In fact, Emma Hardinge Britten, one of the best known trance lecturers both in Britain and the United States, had first tried unsuccessfully to launch a career as an actress. Not a few mediums were caught, at one time or another in their careers, practicing trickery, and professional conjurors had no trouble reproducing many of their allegedly spiritualist manifestations. But purposeful fraud – whether for financial gain, the need for excitement and public attention, or other psychological motives – did not discredit the activities of every Victorian and Edwardian medium. There were many conducting public séances, and far greater numbers working in private circles, who believed in their powers and thought that they were serving humanity through their mediumship. The degree to which the conscious and the subconscious, the voluntary and the involuntary, combined to produce results in the cases of most mediums cannot be determined today with accuracy or justice. "As Huxley said of the crayfish, to know how a medium feels and thinks one must become a medium."[1]

Under the label *medium*, furthermore, many subspecies and variations gathered in the nineteenth century, as today. Some took payment for their services, others refused. Some could produce phenomena in front of hundreds of strangers, others exclusively in the intimacy of

© Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
0521265053 - The Other World: Spiritualism and Psychical Research in England, 1850-1914
Janet Oppenheim
Excerpt
More information

their own homes. Some spoke English with a foreign accent, others like a native, and quite a few like Americans. Some specialized in particular effects, whereas others offered a broad repertoire of manifestations. That repertoire might include the materialization of entire spirit bodies – "full-form materializations" – in addition to the more commonplace rapping, table tilting, and emergence of spirit hands. Reports of séances also told of furniture cavorting around the room, objects floating in the air, mediums levitating, musical instruments playing tunes by themselves, bells ringing, tambourines jangling, strange breezes blowing, weird lights glowing, alluring fragrances and ethereal music wafting through the air. From the bodies of some mediums a strange foamy, frothy, or filmy substance, dubbed ectoplasm, might be seen to condense.

Mediums could relay the words of the departed through the laborious process of alphabet rappings or through the more efficient trance utterance. They might find their hands writing automatically, preside over the baffling appearance of messages written on slates, and ask the planchette or Ouija board for answers to questions posed by eager sitters. The communicating spirit might be that of Benjamin Franklin, Plato, the archangel Gabriel, or the sitter's Aunt Nellie. The possibilities were limitless.

As a medium's reputation spread, he or she would acquire a circle of devoted sitters, a fan club composed of men and women who might seek out the medium's powers as often as several times a week and whose faith in the medium's gifts was unshakable. Any professional medium worthy of the name in the second half of the nineteenth century could point to one or more prominent persons deeply impressed by the phenomena produced at his or her séances, and perhaps even converted to spiritualism as a result. Nonetheless, the significant spread of spiritualism in Victorian Britain probably owed far less to the exertions of professionals than to the development of hundreds of private, or amateur, mediums who discovered their spiritualist powers in their own drawing rooms. As television today, by its location in the home, has an impact that the theater cannot begin to rival, so the work of private mediums, in small domestic circles, brought spiritualism more intimately into the lives of countless believers than could the public sittings of professional mediums. It is, after all, far more compelling to see one's own dining table in motion than to read about the antics of someone else's furniture.

Although the séances of well-known professional mediums have been described and documented in some detail, the activities of most private mediums are, by their very nature, less accessible to the historian's curious eye. One finds references in memoirs, diaries, and letters to

© Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
0521265053 - The Other World: Spiritualism and Psychical Research in England, 1850-1914
Janet Oppenheim
Excerpt
More information

the shock experienced at the discovery of unsuspected spiritualist affinities in spouse, parent, offspring, sibling, friends, and neighbors. One reads of domestic circles developing around the mediumistic talents of a household servant, and the spiritualist press overflowed with stories of men, women, and children who, to their own immense surprise, spoke, wrote, or drew pictures automatically, beheld visions, or caused chairs and tables to gyrate. Spiritualistic prowess often spread among the members of a single family, for mediumship was catching, it would seem, and certainly the power of suggestion and example must have played a substantial part in the rapid multiplication of private mediums during the second half of the nineteenth century. Many of them, however, somewhat in awe of their abilities, shunned publicity, and it is impossible to compute with any precision the numbers of people, of all ages and social strata, who became convinced spiritualists without ever venturing beyond their domestic séances.

Particularly striking is the number of middle-class housewives who discovered powers of trance communication, clairvoyance, and furniture relocation during the 1850s, 1860s, and 1870s. Many of their husbands shared these skills, but it was the womenfolk who predominated in the ranks of the amateur mediums. Indeed mediumship could be, in its fashion, as domesticated and feminine an art as embroidery. Thus while Cromwell Varley, an electrical engineer of some renown, was busy with the Atlantic cable, his wife developed her gifts of trance utterance, clairvoyance, and automatic writing. (Interestingly enough, so did her maid.) Mrs. Augustus De Morgan, wife of the eminent mathematician, saw visions. The wife of a Mr. Fusedale regularly beheld spirits, as did numerous other women, married and single, who communicated their experiences in the columns of the spiritualist press.[2] The testimony is very difficult to evaluate, coming as it does from the medium herself, an enthusiastic relative, or admiring friend. What safeguards against deception were possible? How reliable were the witnesses? Such obvious questions must, of course, be asked and answered before any adequate conclusions can be reached about private mediumship in nineteenth-century Britain, and it is, unfortunately, most unlikely that any replies will be forthcoming to satisfy the skeptical inquirer a century later.

The comment of a contemporary skeptical inquirer at the turn of the century, that called attention to the unfathomed levels of self-deception "in persons of unquestioned good faith," is suggestive, but evasive.[3] It does not explain why so many housebound women embraced mediumistic pursuits in this period. The religious motivations will be explored in subsequent chapters, but surely another part of the explanation lurks in the very word "housebound." Recent work in women's

© Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
0521265053 - The Other World: Spiritualism and Psychical Research in England, 1850-1914
Janet Oppenheim
Excerpt
More information

history has underscored the frustrations experienced by uncounted mid-Victorian women, barred from gainful and stimulating employment by social conventions,with horizons limited by the predictable routine that domestic responsibilities imposed. If fewer men than women developed into private mediums, the reason may well lie primarily in the male duty to earn a living and support a family. There was nothing financially remunerative about home séances, but they offered other rewards that must have appealed mightily to the bored housewife or spinster. (And how much greater must have been the appeal to the household servant, drudging away at endless domestic chores, longing for personal significance and status in a walk of life that provided neither.) If professional mediumship enticed hardier women with career opportunities and glimmering possibilities of excitement and fame, private or amateur mediumship must have served a similar purpose, on a more modest scale, in homes across the country.[4] Domestic séances may have offered something of the escapism so abundantly supplied by soap operas today, but with one important difference: In the spiritualist home circle, the medium was not simply an outside observer; she was the crucial participant in the unfolding drama.

Sir Edward Bulwer-Lytton, the successful novelist and politician who investigated spiritualism for twenty years before his death in 1873, distinguished "mediums of probity and honor supported by people of like character," from "paid professionals" in the business of providing séances.[5] His distinction would appear to be between amateur mediums who used their powers without thought of material reward, and those who sought to support themselves by their talents. Yet such a distinction is too simple. There were mediums who accepted no payment for their séances, but who must surely rank among the most professional of their times, and whose probity and honor were, from time to time, suspect. Likewise, there were mediums who regularly charged a fee for sittings, but whose character was not thereby noticeably blemished. The only distinction that seems generally valid is between those mediums, on the one hand, whose séances were open only to family, friends, and a few strangers introduced by friends, and those, on the other, who sat for a much larger public. Some vignettes of the latter at work may help to suggest their special skills and the milieu in which they operated.

DANIEL DUNGLAS HOME

Of all nineteenth-century mediums, none provoked more commentary – not only in the spiritualist press, but also in the leading periodicals of Victorian England – than Daniel Dunglas Home. He was an enigma

© Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
0521265053 - The Other World: Spiritualism and Psychical Research in England, 1850-1914
Janet Oppenheim
Excerpt
More information

to contemporaries and has remained a puzzle to students of spiritualism ever since. His talents were enormous, and no medium had more zealous disciples. His séances were free, but he accepted lavish gifts from wealthy patrons and was charged in 1868 with trying to defraud a rich old widow of thousands of pounds. *Punch* might relish snide observations at Home's expense, informing readers that "Spirit-hands, at his bidding, will come, touch, and go/ (But you mustn't peep under the table, you know)." The editors of the *Mask* might observe: "That he has sharp eyes, a cunning wit, and quick, long fingers, there is no denying – so has a fox."[6] Nevertheless, no one ever proved that Home was a charlatan, and perhaps the best way to describe this unusual man is the simple label of "human oddity."[7] John Truesdell, in *The Bottom Facts Concerning the Science of Spiritualism*, expressed the opinion that "nearly every fairly-intelligent person is known to possess some latent mediumistic qualities, . . . though remarkable mediums, like true poets or great musicians, are by no means common."[8] By all accounts, Home was the most uncommon of all remarkable mediums.

He was not, however, the first of his profession to arouse public curiosity in England, nor the first medium from America. When he arrived in London in the spring of 1855, two American women, Mrs. Hayden and Mrs. Roberts, had already preceded him across the Atlantic in 1852 and 1853. In their wake, domestic circles all across Britain had blossomed, and table tilting became, for a brief time, a national hobby. Home's appearance in England in 1855, and his return in the autumn of 1859, helped rekindle and sustain the public's enthusiasm, and by the 1860s the spiritualist movement had gained a momentum quite independent of the exertions of any one medium.

It was no coincidence that the heralds of the spiritualist movement in Britain came from the United States. In 1848, Hydesville, New York, was the site of the first series of disturbances that inaugurated what is known as modern spiritualism. News of the "Rochester Rappings" spread quickly across the eastern United States, and the young Fox sisters, Margaret and Kate, in whose presence the rappings occurred, became celebrities. In an atmosphere prepared by widespread interest in mesmerism and phrenology, religious unorthodoxy, mysticism, and social utopianism, spiritualism found a ready audience in numerous American communities. As spiritualism steadily moved westward across the United States, expansion to the east, across the ocean, was only a matter of time. There was a virgin audience in Britain, primed by news of the American phenomena, and ready to be impressed.

Home was not, strictly speaking, American. He was born in Scotland in 1833, had emigrated to the United States with members of his family in the 1840s, probably toward the end of the decade, and had lived for

© Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org