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Séances, Spirits, and Societal Transformations: Spiritualism in Victorian and Edwardian Britain (1865-1910)

ABSTRACT: *This essay examines the historiography of Spiritualism in Victorian and Edwardian Britain (1865-1910), analyzing the societal transformations it experienced over the past century. The author argues that events and movements such as World War I, second wave feminism, and the advent of the internet decisively shaped how scholars approached the history of Spiritualism from a variety of perspectives, including religion, science, gender, and culture.*

KEYWORDS: *modern history; Britain; Victorian era; Edwardian era; Spiritualism; historiography; religion; science; gender; culture*

Introduction

As heavy drapes fall in a quiet drawing room, darkness surrounds those present, a disembodied hand manifests, and messages from beyond the grave are spelled out for all to see: this is the séance, a sacred ritual in a belief system which came to be known as Spiritualism.[1] During the Victorian and Edwardian eras, belief in supernatural occurrences such as communication with the dead, the production of ectoplasm through mediums, and ghostly apparitions were taken as serious claims, sometimes even meriting official scientific investigation.[2] Newspaper articles and novels from the period were full of firsthand accounts of these types of phenomena:

> In 1860, a journalist reported that he had attended a séance in a private drawing room in London, conducted by the celebrated medium, Daniel Dunglas Home. During this séance, if we are to believe the journalist, the medium had risen in the air and, for several minutes, had floated horizontally around the room.[3]

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[1] Spiritualism can be defined as a religion whose practitioners believe in the ability of mediums (i.e., those with strong spiritual gifts or powers) to communicate with the dead. A key practice of Spiritualism is the séance, a ritual during which a medium attempts this type of communication. Sometimes mediums and their guests use a spirit board (also known as a talking board or Ouija board). See, for example, Jan Harold Brunvand, *American Folklore: An Encyclopedia* (1996; Milton Park: Taylor and Francis, 1998), s.v. "Ouija," "Spirit bodies," etc.

[2] Windham Thomas Wyndham-Quin, *Experiences in Spiritualism with D. D. Home* (1869; republished, with an introduction by Edwin Richard Windham Wyndham-Quin Dunraven, Cambridge: University of Cambridge Press, 2012), provides a firsthand account of séance rituals. Inexplicable noises as well as the manifestation of "spirit hands" and messages on spirit boards were the most common occurrences cited. For further firsthand accounts of séances during this period, see Edward William Cox, *Spiritualism Answered by Science: With Proofs of a Psychic Force* (London: Longman, 1871); and Morell Theobald, *Spirit Workers in the Home Circle: An Autobiographic Narrative of Psychic Phenomena in Family Daily Life Extending over a Period of Twenty Years* (London: T. Fisher Unwin, 1887).

[3] Peter Lamont, "Spiritualism and a Mid-Victorian Crisis of Evidence," *The Historical Journal* 47, no. 4 (2004): 897-920, here 897-898.

Despite the popularity of this new movement, many scoffed at such stories and insisted that these occurrences were the work of charlatans and tricksters. This stark division in British society's attitudes toward Spiritualism came to shape how the topic was and is studied. This historiographical essay examines the theories and arguments scholars have presented regarding Spiritualism and its impact on Victorian and Edwardian British society. In doing so, it intends to understand how major events and cultural movements of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries have shaped the topic's place in the study of European history. Utilizing a chronological approach, the essay hopes to enable its readers to better appreciate the shifting arguments and debates presented by scholars in the context of the periods in which they wrote their respective works and place them into the overall scholarship on the topic. In studying the historiography of Spiritualism, five distinct periods emerge: the "foundation" period (1902-1929), the "criticism" period (1930-1959), the "rehabilitation" period (1960-1979), the "resurgence" period (1980-1999), and the "diversification" period (2000-present). Much like the citizens of Britain before them, scholars of both the twentieth and twenty-first centuries have struggled to place the study of Spiritualism into the overall history of Europe and its societies, which is why there are comparatively few historiographical works on the topic. For over a century, debates over Spiritualism's merit for academic study have dominated the conversation. Considered at different times a topic for religious history, the history of science, women's and gender history, or cultural history, Spiritualism has experienced interpretative shifts and societal transformations that have directly impacted how its role has been viewed with regard to both British and European history.

The earliest primary sources associated with Spiritualism during this period consist mainly of séance reports and autobiographical works, among them William Peter Adshead's *Miss Wood in Derbyshire: A Series of Experimental Séances Demonstrating the Fact that Spirits Can Appear in the Physical Form* (1879), Georgiana Houghton's *Evenings at Home in Spiritual Séance* (1881), and Morell Theobald's *Spirit Workers in the Home Circle: An Autobiographic Narrative of Psychic Phenomena in Family Daily Life Extending over a Period of Twenty Years* (1887).[4] These texts permitted religious adherents and skeptics alike to experience (albeit virtually via the printed page) how both working class and high ranking members of British society were integrating séances and other Spiritualist practices into their everyday lives. The works of Houghton and Theobald in particular were written in a tone and style which allowed them to be easily understood and digested. In addition to their accounts, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's two-volume *History of Spiritualism* (1926) remains a key primary source utilized by scholars, both due to

[4] William Peter Adshead, *Miss Wood in Derbyshire: A Series of Experimental Séances Demonstrating the Fact that Spirits Can Appear in the Physical Form* (London: James Burns Publishing, 1879); Georgiana Houghton, *Evenings at Home in Spiritual Séance* (London: Trübner and Co., 1881); Theobald, *Spirit Workers in the Home Circle*.

its format as a detailed collection of articles and reports on Spiritualist activities, and due to its author's fame.[5]

The scholarship on Spiritualism is varied, beginning in 1902 with Frank Podmore's *Modern Spiritualism: A History and a Criticism* and slowly gaining momentum with works by Joseph McCabe (1920) and George Devereux (1953).[6] However, it would not be until the late 1980s that Spiritualism gained a wider appeal amongst historians with works by Judith Walkowitz (1988) and Alex Owen (1989), causing radical transformations which have persisted into the twenty-first century.[7] Most recently, these changes have been seen in publications by Simone Natale (2016), and Hannah Malone (2018/2019).[8] Many of these texts were directly impacted by contemporary events in their authors' lives, such as World War I, second wave feminism, and the advent of the internet, and left their respective marks on the study of Spiritualism's role in British history accordingly.

I. Foundation (1902-1929)

The earliest scholarly works regarding Spiritualism during the Victorian and Edwardian eras established the focus authors would use on the topic over the next half century, with a great deal of attention dedicated to the rituals and tools associated with the Spiritualist movement, as well as the criticism voiced against it. By presenting Spiritualism from a neutral perspective (giving fair coverage to both believers and skeptics), certain scholars hoped to create a proper field of study around it through a combination of historical, anthropological, scientific, and theological principles.

Frank Podmore (1856-1910), an English author, socialist, and member of the Society for Psychical Research, laid the foundation for the historiography of Spiritualism with his 1902 publication *Modern Spiritualism: A History and a Criticism*, an in-depth assessment of Spiritualism and its associated rituals. Podmore divided his analysis into ten distinct chapters, each focusing on a core aspect of Spiritualist belief, such as mediumship, the materialization of

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[5] Arthur Conan Doyle, *The History of Spiritualism*, 2 vols. (London: Cassell and Company, 1926). Scholars usually cite this text because it is one of the earliest known collections of its time. During Doyle's lifetime, scholars used the author's fame to popularize the text in both academic and non-academic circles.

[6] Frank Podmore, *Modern Spiritualism: A History and a Criticism* (London: Methuen & Co., 1902); Joseph McCabe, *Spiritualism: A Popular History from 1847* (London: T. Fisher Unwin, 1920); George Devereux, *Psychoanalysis and the Occult* (New York: International Universities Press, 1953), 66-74.

[7] Judith Walkowitz, "Science and the Séance: Transgressions of Gender and Genre in Late Victorian London," *Representations* 22 (Spring 1988): 3-29; Alex Owen, *The Darkened Room: Women, Power, and Spiritualism in Late Nineteenth Century England* (London: Virago Press, 1989).

[8] Simone Natale, *Supernatural Entertainments: Victorian Spiritualism and the Rise of Modern Media Culture* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2016), reviewed separately by the author of this essay in this volume of *The Welebaethan: A Journal of History*; Hannah Malone, "New Life in the Modern Cultural History of Death," *The Historical Journal* 62, no. 3 (2019): 833–852 (published online 2018).

disembodied limbs, and the act of performing a séance, all through the use of eyewitness accounts and testimonies.[9] Because Podmore reserved the latter half of his work for criticism leveled against Spiritualism, several contemporary colleagues and other academics praised his ability to take a thorough, yet neutral, stance on what was considered a complex and controversial religious movement.[10] While Podmore's work was groundbreaking at the time, it has become dated, especially with regard to its now obsolete or inaccurate scientific observations and hypotheses.

Following in Podmore's footsteps, the British botanist Edward Trusted Bennett (1831-1908) released a publication intended to justify and legitimize the Society for Psychical Research, which had received condemnation from many academics.[11] The Society for Psychical Research, founded in 1882, had inspired a number of scientists and mediums (i.e., those who claimed to be able to communicate with the dead) to research Spiritualism on the basis of scientific methods. The society's prominent members included the British chemist Sir William Crookes, the Irish novelist Jane Barlow, and the British physicist Sir Oliver Lodge.[12] In his *The Society for Psychical Research: Its Rise and Progress and a Sketch of Its Work* (1903), Bennett defended the Society for Psychical Research in its attempts to study Spiritualism, hypnosis, the existence of ghosts, and the existence of telepathy by organizing the organization's body of work in a manner very similar to that used by Podmore.[13] By documenting the society's research and addressing criticism leveled against it, as well as opening it up to a fair bit of criticism, Bennett's work became the first publication made on behalf of the Society for Psychical Research to be taken seriously outside of the organization.[14] While many of the theories and experiments documented by Bennett were eventually considered fraudulent or misleading, his work remains relevant for the historiography of Spiritualism because it serves as one of the earliest examples of how far believers in the supernatural were willing to go to present Spiritualism as a topic worthy of study.

Following Podmore's and Bennett's work, the English writer and former Roman Catholic priest Joseph McCabe (1867-1955) published his own historical analysis of Spiritualism in 1920, one in which it was viewed as a cultural movement that was sweeping across Europe from the United States. McCabe understood that Spiritualism was gaining popularity throughout the country. While being a self-described skeptic of mediums and clairvoyants, his main

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[9] Podmore, *Modern Spiritualism*, vii-xii.

[10] Podmore, *Modern Spiritualism*,181-182.

[11] Janet Oppenheim, *The Other World: Spiritualism and Psychical Research in England, 1850-1914* (1985; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 136-138.

[12] Oppenheim, *Other World*, 139.

[13] Edward T. Bennett, *The Society of Psychical Research: Its Rise and Progress and a Sketch of Its Work* (London: R. Brimley Johnson Publishing, 1903), 3-4.

[14] McCabe, *Spiritualism*, 88-89.

argument in defense of studying Spiritualism was that beliefs in ghosts and the supernatural were as old as humankind itself. Spiritualism was a development in the belief in an afterlife and served as a type of organization for those who were grieving or longing to speak with the dead.[15] It is relevant to note that interest in the study of Spiritualism became much more popular between 1914 and 1930 due to two factors, namely, World War I and the influence of one of Spiritualism's most famous practitioners, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle (1859-1930). Due to the unmitigated level of death and carnage associated with World War I, the grieving families and friends of fallen soldiers, as well as surviving soldiers, sought out mediums to connect with loved ones who had perished on and off the battlefield. Best known for his literary creation, the famous detective Sherlock Holmes, Doyle appeared to many as a living contradiction: the writer of fiction focused almost entirely on science, logic, and deduction, but also an avid supporter of Spiritualism.

Early in his life, Doyle realized he had a fascination with all things mystical and occult, and while he lightly dabbled in both Spiritualism and Freemasonry during the 1880s and 1890s, he never truly participated in either movement. When World War I began in 1914, however, his previously shallow relationship with Spiritualism evolved into an obsession. While Doyle was considered too old to enlist in the British military, his eldest son Kingsley was not and decided to join the army. Around the same time, Lily Symonds, the nanny hired to take care of the Doyle children, claimed to have psychic abilities and offered to conduct a séance. According to Doyle's testimony, Symonds' abilities were authentic, and she made several predictions about the deaths of those close to the Doyle family.[16] Doyle interpreted the events of that night as a "Revelation from God" and decided to commit his life to Spiritualism from that moment forward.[17] Doyle's version of Spiritualism adapted several Christian ideas, such as the belief that mediums were blessed with miraculous powers by God, and that God himself chose which deceased spirits could communicate with the living.[18] When news of his son Kingsley's death reached the family in 1918, Doyle further involved himself in the Spiritualist movement, with the desire to speak to his son as his main motivation.

While some have claimed that Doyle came out publicly as a Spiritualist in 1916, his efforts in researching and participating in the movement did not occur until late 1918, namely, after Kingsley's death. In 1919, Doyle lost his brother and two nephews to pneumonia and the Spanish flu.[19] These losses further motivated Doyle to prove that the human soul existed beyond death. He encouraged Christian Spiritualism because he believed it could bridge the divide between

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[15] McCabe, *Spiritualism*, 18-21.

[16] Matt Wingett, *Conan Doyle and the Mysterious World of Light, 1887-1920* (Portsmouth: Life is Amazing, 2016), 43-44. Wingett's book, it should be noted, is not a scholarly study.

[17] Wingett, *Conan Doyle*, 49.

[18] Wingett, *Conan Doyle*, 55-57.

[19] Wingett, *Conan Doyle*, 59.

secularized Spiritualism and the Christian Church. Doyle even attempted to convince the Spiritualists' National Union (founded in 1901) to adopt an eighth bylaw into their charter which would have stated that it was their goal to follow the teachings of Jesus of Nazareth when using their abilities as mediums and clairvoyants.[20] While his initial involvement with Spiritualism had remained mostly behind closed doors, this changed when Doyle decided to publicly debate well known critics of the movement.[21]

As an advocate for Spiritualism, Doyle promoted studies that had been inspired by the works of Podmore and Bennett, but he also received a great deal of backlash from those who insisted that Spiritualism was nothing more than a chance for frauds to make a quick buck (or, rather, a quick quid). He countered, however, stating that the information given to him through séances would have been impossible for any outsider to know, as specific stories and phrases had been repeated during these séances that had never been mentioned beyond his family.[22] It was criticism that inspired Doyle to compile numerous articles and papers on Spiritualism to help others understand why he was convinced of its validity.[23] When speaking to reporters, Doyle went on record stating that he truly believed Spiritualism was a gift from God which allowed divine and miraculous messages to be given to the living, most likely in order to improve their lives. Doyle continued the interview by stating:

> People ask, what do you get from spiritualism? The first thing you get is that it absolutely removes all fear of death. Secondly, it bridges death for those dear ones whom we may lose. We need have no fear that we are calling them back, for all that we do is to make such conditions as experience has taught us, will enable them to come if they wish. And the initiative lies always with them. They've many times told us that they could not come back if it were not God's will, and that it makes them intensely happy to be able to help and to comfort us, to tell us about their happy life in that world, to which we, are in our turn, destined to come.[24]

It becomes clear from his interview that Doyle believed in some form of positive afterlife, but he did not use the word "heaven" to describe it. As the interview continued, Doyle made it clear how he viewed the media's handling of séance reports and other associated phenomena:

> In contacts with higher spirit people, we do get lofty religious teachings and most inspiring knowledge. The press, unfortunately, usually only notices spiritualism when fraud or folly is in question. Fraud and folly do exist, as in everything, but the press does not mention, as a rule, the thousands of cases where consolation and proof have been brought to suffering hearts. We bring important facts, new facts, which will revolutionize the whole thought of the human race, both in religion and in science. It is the great question of the future, and it will end by

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[20] Robert A. Baker, *Hidden Memories: Voice and Visions Within* (London: Prometheus Books, 1996), 117-118.

[21] McCabe, *Spiritualism*, 44-46.

[22] Doyle, *History of Spiritualism*, vol. 1.

[23] Doyle, *History of Spiritualism*, vol. 2.

[24] Quoted in Wingett, *Conan Doyle*, 32-33.

> making religion a real living thing, so that all doubt of God's goodness, or of the destiny of mankind, will be forever banished, since we shall each be in actual touch with what is higher than ourselves. And the communion of Saints will at last be an established fact.[25]

This new theoretical framework, established by Podmore and expanded by Bennett, McCabe, and Doyle, attempted to legitimize the academic study of Spiritualism by defining it as a contribution to European culture and the culture of Great Britain in particular.[26] To these authors (with the exception of Doyle) the Spiritualist movement had garnered enough of a following to warrant serious scientific consideration. Whether the reported phenomena associated with séances were legitimate or not did not matter. What mattered was that those who chose to adhere to Spiritualism's beliefs and rituals were sincere in their actions, and these actions would have to be taken into account when studying the topic. While McCabe's work had made considerable strides in its presentation of theories and ideological frameworks, it would be overshadowed and even partially ridiculed by some scholars in subsequent years when a large number of fraudulent mediums and clairvoyants were exposed during the 1920s and 1930s.

Despite the fact that the scientific theories outlined in these early publications have become outdated, the works of the foundational period in the historiography of Spiritualism remain indispensable to researchers studying the topic. Podmore, Bennett, and McCabe each offered unique perspectives, and their syntheses of the rituals and beliefs associated with the Spiritualist movement serve as cornerstones for those looking to research the topic. As the belief system of Spiritualism declined in popularity over the following decades, critics of Spiritualism began to take center stage in academia and attempted to dismantle the scholarly foundations that had been laid.

II. Criticism (1930-1959)

Due to the considerable number of exposed charlatans and frauds, as well as the general disillusionment that came with the outbreak of World War II, Spiritualism lost its popularity in both society and academic fields of study. During the 1930s and 1940s, very few scholarly works were published on the topic. Those that were published throughout the 1940s and 1950s mostly shied away from the structure and themes of earlier publications, focusing instead on disproving Spiritualism and its associated beliefs. While a few attempts were made to defend Spiritualism, they often backfired or went unnoticed in the realm of academic scholarship.

Considering Bennett's work on the Society for Psychical Research outdated, the British classical scholar and lawyer William Henry Salter (1880-1969) in 1948 published a new history of the organization, which he was serving as president at the time. Unlike Bennett, however, Salter did not attempt to appear neutral in his writing, instead insisting on the organization's legitimacy and role in encouraging

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[25] Quoted in Wingett, *Conan Doyle*, 33.

[26] McCabe, *Spiritualism*, 115-141.

the practice of Spiritualism throughout Britain.[27] Salter directly cited Doyle as one of the most influential figures in encouraging research in Spiritualism and the paranormal, hoping the author's fame would increase the success of his own work.[28] Unfortunately for Salter, his publication caused a downward spiral for the Society for Psychical Research and is seen by some as truly launching a period of criticism against the study of Spiritualism in academic communities.[29] Members of the public who had previously supported the organization scoffed at Salter's work and soon began to associate the group with the very same charlatans and frauds whom the Society for Psychical Research had condemned in the past for giving Spiritualism negative connotations. Both academics and skeptics outside of the Society for Psychical Research seized the chance to publish scathing reviews against psychical research, Spiritualist practices, and all things supernatural.

In 1953, Georges Devereux (1908-1985), a Franco-Hungarian ethnologist and psychoanalyst, published his study *Psychoanalysis and the Occult* (1953). Devereux initially attempted to appear neutral in his study of Spiritualism but then completely dismissed Podmore's and McCabe's earlier analyses of the movement as a cultural phenomenon.[30] Instead, Devereux argued that those who practiced Spiritualism or any of its rituals were individuals who suffered from a combination of mental illnesses and psychiatric delusions.[31] He especially attacked the writings of Doyle and could not understand how the creator of Sherlock Holmes, a character dedicated to the pursuit of logic, deduction and reasoning, could have been a devout Spiritualist practitioner.[32] For Devereux, Doyle served as the ultimate example of how deeply Spiritualism could affect an individual's perceived intelligence and critical thinking skills.[33] Devereux's argument against Spiritualism as a cultural movement and legitimate religious practice came to have lasting repercussions, with academics left to attempt defenses of the movement over the next few decades. However, Devereux's claims are perhaps unsurprising when placed into the context of the era in which they were written, as the 1950s were a time period in which Europe (and the United States) saw many scientific breakthroughs and technological developments, and were, after the destruction of World War II, more concerned with things material rather than things spiritual.

Following the end of colonization, as some countries were developing nuclear weapons which could potentially end all human life in an instant, Europe, and the

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[27] William H. Salter, *The Society for Psychical Research: An Outline of Its History* (London: The Society of Psychical Research, 1948), 11-13.

[28] Salter, *Society for Psychical Research*, 33-34.

[29] Oppenheim, *Other World*, 208-209.

[30] Devereux, *Psychoanalysis and the Occult*, 118-120.

[31] Devereux, *Psychoanalysis and the Occult*, 119-120.

[32] Devereux, *Psychoanalysis and the Occult*, 55-59.

[33] Devereux, *Psychoanalysis and the Occult*, 58-59.

rest of the Western world entered into a decade of increased emphasis on science and technology. Spiritualism, already considered a niche belief system at best, was relegated to the margins of society and the peripheries of academic study. Very few scholars were willing to defend the study of such a topic, fearing that they might be labeled as delusional or be ridiculed for their research. Over the next two decades, a handful of cultural scholars managed to keep the topic alive, finding clever ways around any associated negative stigmas, while also avoiding association with Spiritualist practitioners who were engaged in their own apologetics.

III. Rehabilitation (1960-1979)

With only a few works on Spiritualism published between 1960 and 1979, this period of rehabilitation proved to be pivotal. English writer Ronald Pearsall (1927-2005) and Welsh academic David Gwilym James (1905-1968) were among the first who attempted to revive scholarly interest in the topic, hoping to undo what they perceived as the damage caused by Devereux. Both Pearsall and James wrote about topics related to British history, with Spiritualism serving as a secondary or complementary topic in their respective works.[34]

In *The Worm in the Bud: The World of Victorian Sexuality* (1969), Pearsall focused his attention on sexuality and the roles of both men and women during the Victorian era. Through his research, he discovered that the imbalance of power between men and women extended beyond the bedroom and into many aspects of social and religious life.[35] Men who attended séances were seen as healthily exploring their spiritual side, while women who practiced Spiritualism were seen as delusional, particularly if their beliefs proved problematic for their husbands.[36] Pearsall skillfully kept Victorian sexuality as the focus of his work, but the inclusion of several sections on Spiritualism allowed the topic to remain conversant in academic circles.[37]

In a similar fashion, James weaved Spiritualism into his study on science and faith in Victorian England. While focusing on Cambridge scholar Henry Sidgwick (1838-1900), a highly influential figure in the fields of ethics and philosophy during the Victorian and Edwardian eras, James was able to zoom in on a largely overlooked aspect of Sidgwick's life, namely, the fact that he had helped establish the Society for Psychical Research back in 1882.[38] James also dedicated a portion of his 1970 monograph, *Henry Sidgwick: Science and Faith in Victorian England*, to Sidgwick's role as the organization's first president and his efforts to allow women

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[34] Ronald Pearsall, *The Worm in the Bud: The World of Victorian Sexuality* (New York: Macmillan, 1969); and David Gwilym James, *Henry Sidgwick: Science and Faith in Victorian England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1970).

[35] Pearsall, *Worm in the Bud*, 55.

[36] Pearsall, *Worm in the Bud*, 67-68.

[37] Pearsall, *Worm in the Bud*, 77, 93.

[38] James, *Henry Sidgwick*, 21.

into academic groups associated with the organization.[39] Throughout his text, James carefully balanced out any attention given to Spiritualism to prevent critics from outright dismissing his research. The response to both Pearsall's and James's works were positive, which encouraged other scholars to keep the study of Spiritualism viable as a secondary focus in their respective publications. James's work in particular managed to gain traction by reviving McCabe's ideology of defining Spiritualism as a cultural movement and belief system, one which needed be looked upon with neutrality in order to facilitate academic study.[40]

Partially inspired by the publications of Pearsall and James, Latvian social anthropologist Vieda Skultans (b. 1944) made the most overt attempt at reestablishing the study of Spiritualism during this period. In her work *Intimacy and Ritual: A Study of Spiritualism, Mediums, and Groups* (1974), Skultans reconstructed a group of Spiritualists attending a séance through the lens of ethnography.[41] By placing Spiritualism and its practitioners in this particular type of context, Skultans was able to place herself outside the Spiritualist movement. Because she wrote as a social anthropologist and viewed the group as an outsider, academics and critics were more willing to accept her work without associating her directly with Spiritualism. Using techniques similar to those employed by McCabe, Skultans analyzed the tools and rituals of Spiritualism, arguing it merited study without trying to prove or disprove the beliefs of those who practiced it.[42]

Scholarly publications were light during this period of rehabilitation. Those who did choose to write about the topic apparently did so with some hesitation and often relegated it to the sidelines of their research. Critics slowly seemed to accept Spiritualism as a secondary area of focus, with less emphasis placed on proving or disproving the supernatural elements associated with it. Yet the texts of this rehabilitation period proved instrumental in keeping academic interest in Spiritualism alive. As the 1970s came to a close, the topic's resurgence was on the horizon.

IV. Resurgence (1980-1999)

As second wave feminism was gaining more traction in Europe and the United States, scholars started to analyze women's various roles in the past and discovered that a majority of mediums and clairvoyants in Victorian and Edwardian Britain had indeed been women. This discovery dramatically altered the way in which Spiritualism's history was examined. Instead of focusing on the rituals of Spiritualism, scholars now began to look toward the identities of those

[39] James, *Henry Sidgwick*, 44-46.

[40] James, *Henry Sidgwick*, 44-45.

[41] Vieda Skultans, *Intimacy and Ritual: A Study of Spiritualism, Mediums, and Groups* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1974).

[42] Skultans, *Intimacy and Ritual*, 24-25.

clairvoyants and mediums who had gained fame and monetary success through their skills during the Victorian and Edwardian eras.

The resurgence of scholarship on the history of Spiritualism in the 1980s began with journalist, author, and amateur (i.e., not academically affiliated) historian Ruth Brandon (b. 1943), who attempted to reconcile the ideas previously presented by Devereux with her own focus on women in the Spiritualist movement. In *The Spiritualists: The Passion for the Occult in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries* (1983), Brandon focused on the control the mediums had over the environment and guests during a séance, with an emphasis on the ways in which they could manipulate the senses of those around them.[43] While her work echoed Devereux's in its focus on fraudulent individuals, Brandon's work was unique and unprecedented because it also examined the ways women could exert power and control over men during a time period in which they were often confined to the home.[44] By analyzing the ways in which gender roles were temporarily nullified during a séance, Brandon changed how scholars looked at Spiritualism, transforming it from a debate over rituals and fraud to a discussion on gender and social struggles in British society.

In 1988, while still a professor of History at Rutgers (she would accept an appointment at Johns Hopkins the following year), American historian Judith R. Walkowitz (b. 1945) published her seminal article, "Science and the Séance: Transgressions of Gender and Genre in Late Victorian London."[45] While Spiritualism and its history up until that point had largely been the scholarly domain of amateur writers, literary scholars, scientists, psychoanalysts, anthropologists, and ethnologists, Walkowitz now added the voice of a professional historian. In this article, she examined the life of a medium named Mrs. Weldon. While highly influential in Spiritualist circles, Mrs. Weldon was challenged by psychiatric doctors who claimed women were unfit for Spiritualism due to the "feebleness of their small minds."[46] By focusing on Mrs. Weldon's struggles within the patriarchal systems of Victorian Britain, Walkowitz was able to demonstrate how Spiritualism had acted as an escape and reprieve for women

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[43] Ruth Brandon, *The Spiritualists: The Passion for the Occult in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1983), 34-36.

[44] Brandon, *Spiritualists*, 74. Brandon's focus on the power dynamics in Spiritualism has impacted other scholars; see, for example, Logie Barrow, *Independent Spirits: Spiritualism and English Plebians, 1850-1910* (London: Routledge, 1986). While scholarship on Spiritualism during the 1980s tended to focus on its role in women's history, there were several works which addressed the role of Victorian class structures in shaping Spiritualism's appeal. In *Independent Spirits: Spiritualism and English Plebeians: 1850-1910*, social scientist Logie Barrow argues that Spiritualism appealed to every social class, challenging the traditional notion that Spiritualism was merely a movement for the upper classes. For the impact of Brandon's work, see also Lynda Nead, *Myths of Sexuality: Representations of Women in Victorian Britain* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1988).

[45] Walkowitz, "Science and the Séance."

[46] Walkowitz, "Science and the Séance," 3-4.

who were feeling constrained by the societal expectations of their day.[47] Her study on a female medium echoed many of the themes found in Pearsall's earlier publication. Walkowitz chose to focus on women in society, rather than sexuality or sexual expectations. Due to Walkowitz's work, the role of Spiritualism in European history became further linked to women's history and the struggle for gender equality. While both Brandon and Walkowitz made strides in developing this new narrative in the history of Spiritualism, some feminist scholars felt that neither had gone far enough in recognizing women in the Spiritualist movement.

In 1989, while still working in Women's Studies at Harvard (she would subsequently spend most of her career at Northwestern), British historian Alex Owen (b. 1948) published the most complete work on women in the historiography of Spiritualism to date, *The Darkened Room: Women, Power, and Spiritualism in Late Victorian England*. In this groundbreaking analysis, Owen focused on the issues of "power and subversion" impressed upon women during the Victorian and Edwardian eras.[48] By utilizing newspaper articles, diaries, newsletters, posters, audio recordings, and eyewitness testimonies, Owen illustrated how deeply engrained Spiritualism was in the culture of Victorian and Edwardian England, especially for women.[49] Owen's publication became the definitive historical work on Spiritualism for the rest of the twentieth century and has cast a long shadow. As of 2020, nearly every subsequent work on the topic has cited Owen's analysis of women in the movement.

This period of resurgence sparked a new interest in Spiritualism.[50] Academics working on women's history especially embraced the history of Spiritualism with a fervor the topic had not seen since its inception. As attitudes in academia grew more positive toward the study of Spiritualism and its history, more professional historians (such as Walkowitz and Owen) began to write on the topic. However, Spiritualism still remained secondary and was usually presented as complimenting other main areas of study. For example, while publications on the history of women or the history of religion featured sections about Spiritualism, these books were considered women's history or religious history first and history of Spiritualism second. Thus, Spiritualism still found itself relegated to specific parameters created by each researcher.

V. Diversification (2000-Present)

At the turn of the twenty-first century, a new generation of historians began to analyze the history of Spiritualism and in turn drastically shifted the

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[47] Walkowitz, "Science and the Séance," 22.

[48] Owen, *Darkened Room*, ii-iii.

[49] Owen, *Darkened Room*, 295-299.

[50] For additional publications on the history of Spiritualism, see Catherine L. Albanese, review of *Other Powers: The Age of Suffrage, Spiritualism, and the Scandalous Victoria Woodhull* by Barbara Goldsmith," *The American Historical Review* 104, no. 3 (1999): 915-916; and Jennifer Hazelgrove, "Spiritualism after the Great War," *Twentieth Century British History* 10, no. 4 (1999): 404-430.

historiographical frameworks previously associated with it. The advent of the internet brought with it an information revolution the likes of which had not been seen since the invention of the printing press. New and diverse viewpoints on a variety of topics now exist because of the increased accessibility of past knowledge and source material. In this new world, the historiography of Spiritualism is taking new and often exciting steps forward.

In 2004, historian Peter Lamont (who is also a magician and works at the University of Edinburgh's School of Philosophy, Psychology and Language) published his article "Spiritualism and a Mid-Victorian Crisis of Evidence," placing Spiritualism into a wider cultural struggle of the Victorian era, namely, the conflicting ideologies of modern science and traditional faith. Lamont argued that British citizens of the Victorian and Edwardian eras turned to Spiritualism because they had lost faith in traditional Christian religion and believed that séance phenomena had more validity than the Christian faith or miracles.[51] Lamont placed Spiritualism firmly between science and faith, claiming that its unique vantage point contributed to its popularity in Europe and particularly Britain.[52] While Lamont's article echoed some of the earlier attempts to legitimize Spiritualism as a sincerely held belief system by its practitioners, his effort to situate it within the history of scientific developments was new.

Due in part to the rise of social media and a new dependence on technology, some scholars, such as Simone Natale, a Lecturer in Communication and Media Studies at Loughborough University in the UK, but originally from Italy, have begun to look at Spiritualism's rise during the Victorian and Edwardian eras as the result of mass media developments during these periods. In *Supernatural Entertainments: Victorian Spiritualism and the Rise of Modern Media Culture* (2016), Natale argues that Spiritualism only gained its popularity due to the coverage it received in newspapers and other publications, while the topic itself in turn fueled the rise of mass media culture.[53] Natale acknowledges that the movement was a genuine religion for some but states that it was the media coverage and showmanship of the séance ritual that caused its popularity to increase, as opposed to any supernatural experiences.[54]

In 2018/2019, one of the most recent works in the field, the article "New Life in the Modern Cultural History of Death," was published by architectural historian Hannah Malone (currently a researcher in the Center for the History of Emotions at Berlin's Max Planck Institute for Human Development). Malone drew inspiration from McCabe's 1920 work and redefined Spiritualism as one of many movements across the globe in which a particular culture copes with death.[55]

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[51] Lamont, "Spiritualism," 917.

[52] Lamont, "Spiritualism," 912-913.

[53] Natale, *Supernatural Entertainments*, 44-47.

[54] Natale, *Supernatural Entertainments*, 111-113.

[55] Malone, "New Life in the Modern Cultural History of Death," 194.

Spiritualism, according to Malone, was the method by which Europeans and Americans held on to those who passed, similar to the ways in which the dead are preserved or remembered in Asian and African cultures.[56] Malone's interpretation of Spiritualism appears to stem from the increased globalization of the past decade. Instead of focusing solely on Europe, global movements are examined and compared in their local contexts. As a result, Spiritualism has become one example of many beliefs and ideas about death found throughout the world.

The placement of Spiritualism into a wider global context aligns the topic with other cultural viewpoints on death and mourning. For the British citizens of the Victorian and Edwardian eras, being able to communicate with past loved ones served as a motivating cultural force. As scientific and technological advancements continue, humanity will perhaps learn some of the answers to questions which have only been alluded to in the past. How will the study of Spiritualism and its accompanying historiography be affected by such discoveries? Will another period of criticism and doubt take hold, or will future events cause an increase in the topic's popularity?

Conclusion

By examining the chronological development of theories and ideas associated with Spiritualism and by considering the contemporary events that affected the scholars working on the topic, this historiographical essay has shown how Spiritualism gradually became a secondary factor in various fields of historical research. Found at different times in religious history, as well as the histories of science, gender, and culture, studies on Spiritualism have had a lasting impact. Future publications on the topic may draw from these works or may instead take the subject into uncharted waters, possibly by associating Spiritualism with events and movements that have yet to materialize.

For all the topic's longevity and diversity, someone has yet to write a scholarly synthesis on Spiritualism. Perhaps the fear of stigma still persists. Whatever the reason may be, one thing is clear: Spiritualism's appeal has been its ability to serve as an access point to many different types of historical study. Much like the spirits who serve as the cornerstone for its rituals and beliefs, Spiritualism's legacy remains anything but dead or forgotten.

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[56] Malone, "New Life in the Modern Cultural History of Death," 199-200.