

### Occult and Psychic Sciences

JANET OPPENHEIM, *The Other World: Spiritualism and Psychological Research in England, 1850–1914*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985. xii + 503 pp. No price stated.

The past few years have witnessed the publication of several books about spiritualism; but perhaps the best-known or most thoroughly promoted of these have been execrable attempts to disguise intransigent scepticism about the paranormal as pieces of genuine scholarship.<sup>1</sup> Janet Oppenheim, an historian at The American University in Washington, D.C., has produced a book that stands in sharp contrast to these works. Not only is it an example of real scholarship, and well written to boot; it also lacks the supercilious and utterly groundless pretensions of clarity and discernment so often found in the books by professional sceptics and debunkers.

Oppenheim obviously has opinions concerning the genuineness or paranormality of spiritualist phenomena (some of which deserve to be challenged). But these are neither the focus of nor the essential background to the book. Instead, she attempts to probe the personalities and issues that fuelled and characterized the spiritualist movement. Rather than dismissing spiritualists generally as weak-minded or gullible, she tries to explain why spiritualism appealed to so many people from so many different backgrounds: aristocrats, artisans, intellectuals, members of the middle and working classes; and she considers why it was hailed as an important new science as well as a new religion. She is especially concerned to show how spiritualism was part of a more widespread reaction to the development of scientific materialism.

Although Oppenheim recognizes that spiritualism flourished in many parts of the world during the period 1850–1914, she focuses on events in Britain for two reasons. First, the deep philosophical, psychological, and sociological issues relevant to an understanding of British spiritualism tend to be the same as those that shaped the movement in other countries. And second, the idiosyncracies of the situation in Britain were sufficiently rich and fascinating to justify a study of the British evidence alone.

<sup>1</sup>Most notably, R. Brandon, *The Spiritualists* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1983); and T. H. Hall, *The Enigma of Daniel Home* (Buffalo: Prometheus, 1984). For a review of the latter, see S. E. Braude, *Journal of the Society for Psychological Research*, 53 (1985), 40–6.

The book is divided into three parts, the first of which is called 'The Setting'. Chapter 1, 'Mediums', briefly introduces some of the principal figures whose phenomena stimulated the British spiritualist movement—e.g., D. D. Home, Florence Cook, Mary Showers, and Henry Slade. It includes some interesting speculations about why women so often became mediums. Chapter 2, 'Membership', examines the major British spiritualist organizations and their leading participants, as well as the religious, philosophical, and sometimes political issues that distinguished the different groups.

Part II of Oppenheim's book is called 'A surrogate faith'. Here, she discusses in greater detail topics introduced earlier—in particular, the religious and philosophical issues that either separated or united the different branches of the spiritualist movement, as well as the connections between these divisions and class divisions in British society.

Chapter 3, 'Spiritualism and Christianity', examines the varieties of Christian and anti-Christian spiritualism, and the leading partisans of the different schools of thought. Chapter 4, 'Psychical research and agnosticism', considers the development and early work of the British Society for Psychical Research, and the issues driving its founders. Oppenheim offers interesting observations on Henry and Eleanor Sidgwick, A. J. Balfour, F. W. H. Myers, and Oliver Lodge, among others. Chapter 5, 'Theosophy and the occult', examines the tensions and affinities between the spiritualist and theosophical movements. Included are portraits of Madame Blavatsky, Annie Besant, and others, as well as a good discussion of the alleged scientific foundations and philosophical underpinnings of the theosophical movement. Throughout Part II, Oppenheim demonstrates an admirable grasp of subtle conceptual issues, and seems as much at home sorting out philosophical distinctions as in tracing lines of historical development.

Part III, 'A pseudoscience', is not quite as successful in this regard, although parts of it are very good indeed. Chapter 6, 'Concepts of mind', surveys the impact of spiritualism on venerable issues in psychology and the philosophy of mind, and pays particular attention to the work of Myers and Edmund Gurney. Chapter 7, 'The problem of evolution', considers attempts to reconcile the world views implied by the different forms of spiritualism with that suggested by evolutionary theory. Oppenheim offers detailed discussions of Robert Chambers and A. R. Wallace. The final chapter, 'Physics and psychic phenomena', considers how leading scientists handled the apparent conflicts between the science of their day and the ostensibly paranormal phenomena associated with spiritualism. As one might have predicted, she pays close attention to William Crookes, William Barrett, and Oliver Lodge.

Although the chapter on evolution is especially good, this part of the book is rather less conceptually virtuosic than the first two. Oppenheim repeatedly confuses two issues: whether (on the one hand) spiritualists resisted or rejected the procrustean methods of physics in connection with the life sciences or behavioural sciences, and (on the other) whether spiritualists were simply being non-scientific. Too often she suggests that only the 'hard' sciences are properly regarded as scientific, a position that is both false and unnecessary for her discussion. She also seems rather confused about what Cartesian dualism is, and suggests (incorrectly) that it is the only escape from strict deterministic materialism.

I would also take issue with certain of Oppenheim's positions regarding psychical research. Although she has obviously made a detailed and conscientious study of the literature, her grasp of the material is apparently not always very secure. For example, it is not clear that she recognizes Frank Podmore's glaring blind-spots concerning psychokinesis (see pp. 55, 147–8). His book *The Newer Spiritualism* is full of serious misrepresentations of the evidence and examples of shoddy reasoning. And I challenge her description of the Sidwicks' reaction to Palladino on the Ile Roubaud as 'noncommittal' (p. 150).<sup>2</sup> Oppenheim's description of the 1895 Cambridge sittings with Eusapia is likewise somewhat misleading; and she accepts rather easily the story that Eusapia was exposed in America (p. 152). Moreover, she overemphasizes the importance of the extent to which Home (rather than Crookes) controlled the events at seances. With certain of his phenomena or under certain test conditions, the issue hardly matters. The better phenomena cannot be dismissed on the grounds that Crookes was not fully in control of the proceedings; they can be dismissed only if there is a better explanation of how *those particular phenomena* could have been produced under the conditions that prevailed. And I would maintain that certain of the reported phenomena cannot be thus explained away. Moreover, even at the

<sup>2</sup>See O. Lodge, 'Experience of Unusual Physical Phenomena Occurring in the Presence of an Entranced Person (Eusapia Palladino)', with discussion, *J. Society for Psychical Research*, 6 (1894), 306–60 (pp. 339–40).

most informal sittings, what often resists an adequate sceptical counter-explanation is the sheer multiplicity of phenomena that reportedly occurred.<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, Oppenheim seems rigidly opposed to the possibility of materialization phenomena (see, e.g., p. 342). While she no doubt shares that opinion with the majority of academicians, I would suggest that it betrays ignorance of the full data and the conceptual issues involved in assessing it.<sup>4</sup> It is also an unnecessary intrusion of opinion into an otherwise largely impartial study.

But these are quibbles, indeed; and Oppenheim may certainly be permitted the occasional spasm of orthodoxy. While some may wish to dispute certain of her interpretations of events, her book is nevertheless a splendid scholarly achievement. It deserves the attention of both physical and behavioural scientists who want to understand an extraordinary period in the history of ideas, and parapsychologists, most of whom know next to nothing of the history of their own field.

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<sup>3</sup>For a detailed discussion of physical mediumship, and the cases of Home and Palladino in particular, see S. E. Braude, *The Limits of Influence: Psychokinesis and the Philosophy of Science* (London and Boston: Routledge & Kegan Paul, in the press).

<sup>4</sup>See Braude *ibid.*

### Charles Schmitt: An Appreciation

Charles B. Schmitt died suddenly in Padua on 15 April 1986, aged 52. He had been a member of the Editorial Board of *Annals of Science* since 1974. How he became involved with *Annals* is recounted below by my predecessor.

There are many members of the republic of letters throughout the world who are sad at the loss of a great scholar, teacher, and friend. An obituary will appear in a subsequent issue.

The editor

Dr I. GRATTAN-GUINNESS writes:

It would be appropriate to put on record Charles's involvement in *Annals of Science*. When I took over the journal in June 1974, it was clear that a radical reconstruction was necessary; and one feature related to its terms of reference. Since its founding the journal had carried in its subtitle the phrase 'since the Renaissance', intended to exclude Renaissance studies from its brief but which I luckily misunderstood as including them; so I sought an appropriate representative for my new editorial board. Charles was the obvious first choice: fortunately he readily agreed to act, and played an important role in the fresh planning which occupied the board for many months. He remained a member until his death on 15 April 1986: in addition, during two extended periods of my residence in Australia, he conducted the book reviews section.

My accidental extension of the period of reference of this journal played a great role in its revival; for under Charles's stimulation and guidance, important articles on Renaissance science appeared in our pages, written both by himself and by others. Not long before his appointment to the board, he had moved to the Warburg Institute from the University of Leeds, and this happy accident of geography gave us the opportunity to meet regularly and discuss matters of common interest. In particular, it was my learning from him of the importance of Renaissance science and of the flourishing state of its current historiography, together with a continuing bamboozlement over the ambiguous semantics of 'since the Renaissance', that led me in 1976 to revise the temporal clause in our sub-title to read 'from the thirteenth century'. This change not only brought clarity of purpose to the journal but also a deeper commitment to the areas of research to which Charles was dedicating his career.

In the content of his research Charles Schmitt was a Renaissance scholar; in the depth and range of his knowledge, he was a Renaissance man. For all of us, his death marks a major loss; for a privileged few among us, his passing removes a dear friend.