



'A solace to a tortured world...' - The Growing Interest in Spiritualism during and after WW1

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In the 21st century, how many of us believe in ghosts' Is commune with the dead now confined to the pages of teenage fiction and mass market horror' Or could we, as a society, once more turn to spiritualism in our hundreds of thousands as our grand and great grandparents did during and after the Great War?

I have recently been researching the rise of spiritualism from 1914 until the 1930s, from a resurgence to a decline from which it has not recovered. The work of Jenny Hazelgrove in [Spiritualism and British Society Between the Wars](#)(2000)and Professor Jay Winter [in Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning](#)(2014), have informed my work on the emotional impact of the war on society as a whole, as I make the argument for a 'Shell Shocked Britain'. Why did so many rational men and women, in secular and religious communities, place their faith in the spiritualist church' How did individual mediums convince them of the possibility of opening a channel of communication with loved ones lost in the trenches, air or seas of the conflict?

By the end of that war, few families had escaped the experience of loss. If one's own family had come home safely, a friend or family member would have suffered bereavement. A small community may have lost the majority of its young, male residents and the grieving process was a national experience, so widely felt that spiritualism found a large and ready audience. Professor Winter has said it 'provided a means through which the dead led the way'. They helped both to lift the burden of grief borne by their families and to spread the 'truth' of spirit communication'.

'Celebrity' endorsements, then as now, increased spiritualism's popularity. Believers such as Sir Arthur Conan Doyle and Sir Oliver Lodge, although not necessarily in agreement with each other (Doyle took an emotional stance, Lodge a more rational view) saw spirit communication as akin to new work on electricity and radio waves. Both men had lost loved ones to the war. Lodge wrote a book based on his communication with his son, Raymond, who was killed at Ypres in 1915. In it he described 'Summerland' where Raymond now resided, enjoying a life without the cares those on earth experienced. 100 years on, we can look at it as a cultural response to mass bereavement, but even in the 21st century there is still a yearning to believe there is a life beyond death.

Many, including those in the Catholic and Anglican churches, were wholly against the new 'craze?', described vividly by an anonymous letter writer, who had seen military service, to *The Courier* in 1919:

'Mothers and friends of fallen soldiers resorting to table-rapping, creakings, automatic writing through the medium of the planchette, Ouija, heliograph etc. in the hope of once more communicating with their loved ones'.

The author of the letter accused mediums of being aggressive 'quacks' that preyed on the delusional and were mouthpieces of the devil himself. Warming to his subject, his rant led to a significant error ' he maintained that soldiers did not turn to spiritualism, when as Professor Jay Winter points out, the memoirs and letters of serving personnel were abound with images and legends of a spiritualist nature.

Critics called this belief in a glorious afterlife a 'menace' and suggested those who believed were 'gullible imbeciles' to fall for the 'roguery' of spiritualists. As the correspondent to *The Courier* went on:

?There are many unfortunate beings today in our lunatic asylums driven mad by demoniacal possession. They are also directly responsible for many suicides??In females it often results in hysterics, chronic insomnia &c.'

A doctor, writing to *The Western Daily Press* in 1912, replied to Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's assertion that no harm could come to anyone involved in spiritualist practices. On the contrary, he said, it was clear that there were 'fear-fascinated neurotics' for whom the sance was very dangerous, and that the same people would inevitably be drawn to self-introspection and psychoanalysis, of which he had a similarly low opinion.

The response to the rise of spiritualism at this time was often couched in misogynistic terms. Mediums were usually female, finding what they considered to be a positive role that brought them to prominence in a society still restricting and marginalising the work thought appropriate for a respectable woman to do. In fact, from spiritualism's Victorian heyday onwards, some 'sensitive' women were exploited by men who took them round wealthy parlours almost as a freak show.

The rise of spiritualism and its links to issues of gender, the role of religion and the need for certainty and succour is fascinating, and not often discussed. It would be an interesting topic for further research.

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