

A Comprehensive History of Parapsychology in France

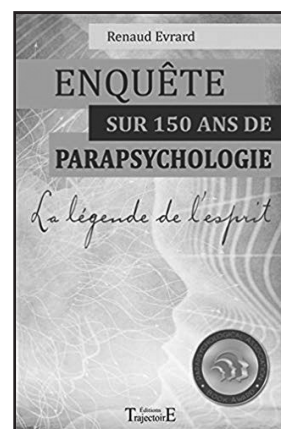
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A review of *Enquête sur 150 Ans de Parapsychologie: La Légende de l'Esprit* [An Inquiry of 150 Years of Parapsychology: The Legend of the Mind], by Renaud Evrard, Editions Trajectoire, 2016. Pp. 479. €25.00 (paperback). ISBN 978-28-41-97702-4

As the author states in the first pages, the purpose of this volume is to carry out a historical inquiry of parapsychology in France by focusing both on the results of studies and experiments, and on philosophical, sociological, and psychological issues related to this activity, which has always been in an ambiguous and unresolved relation with the main culture. The book however does not present a chronological description of events, but consists of ten extensive biographies of leading French personalities in the discipline.

A few of these ones are already well known, even outside France, but the author presents much supplementary and new information so we can better understand their involvement with the “psychic occult.” For example, the multifaceted commitments of the politician, man of culture, and theologian Agénor de Gasparin (1810-1871) are presented, as well as his early involvement with “animal magnetism” (i.e. hypnosis) and some physical phenomena of early mediumship, including table movements (also recently studied by Alvarado, 2018). Moreover, the book examines in detail numerous studies of the scientist Charles Richet (1850-1935), with particular attention to the experiences of the 1880s on “sleep induced at a distance” (telepathically), and to the famous mediumistic séances held during the early XX century at Algiers, where the “materialization” of the so-called Bien Boa occurred. In this chapter, about the length of a small book, a deep analysis is presented of Richet’s sometimes contradictory opinions on these subjects, his relationships and collaborations with other scientists, and the prevalence of the studies of mediumship in his career as a psychical researcher.

Among the lesser-known characters in the work of Evrard, the personalities of Timothée Puel (1812-1890) and François Favre (1942-2016) stand out. The first one, who lived in an age full of discourses and “discoveries” on mesmerism, contributed mainly to French psychical research by editing for a few years a journal devoted to “psychic matters,” the *Revue de Psychologie Expérimentale*, which disseminated a lot of information about the first studies carried out on the subject. The journal included translations of English works (e.g., the work of the London Dialectical Society), and articles from the *Psychische Studien*, the magazine founded in Germany by the Russian spiritualist Alexander Aksakov.



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François Favre is a modern author who, following the “ideology of 1968,” was one of the founders and main promoter of a famous group of studies deep-rooted in the university environment. That group wanted to promote integration of parapsychological themes, so it chose to set aside experimental research in favor of theoretical discussion, debates, and confrontation with orthodox circles. Evrard takes an important step, by showing that, to focus on the cultural perspective of a discipline, not only those who perform practical activities (studies) are important, but also those who favor the dissemination and introduction of relevant issues in the public opinion and the media, a perspective not always conceded by historians of culture (see also Evrard, 2017; Evrard & Pratte, 2017).

Pierre Janet (1859-1947), with his strong change of attitude towards parapsychology; Pierre Curie (1859-1906), and the Institut Général Psychologique; René Sudre (1880-1968), Eugène Osty (1874-1938) and the *Institut Métapsychique International*; René Warcollier (1881-1962), and finally Nicolas Maillard (1969-2000), are the other main personalities of this volume, which contains more information than any other publication on French parapsychology (e.g. Brower, 2010; Lachapelle, 2005; Marmin, 2001; Méheust, 1999).

The picture that emerges from the book is that of an effort, lasting for a century and a half, and performed by many culturally relevant personalities, to bring within the “dominant culture” themes related to magnetism and parapsychology (and to a few other “heretical” ideas), receiving often a dry, sometimes tolerant but superficial attention, but rarely a positive reception.

Evrard’s *Enquête* is certainly a reference book for anyone who wants, from now on, to really know important milestones of parapsychology in France. The book has an impressive length: 470 pages of text, composed in small letters and on two columns; 2,110 references, many of them citing multiple books or articles; 35 boxed sections within chapters, some of which occupy two or three pages, and whose content is about other characters and events of French parapsychology.

It has to be added that the same elements that make this book unique and precious also present weak points of no small importance. The author’s choice to focus on the biographies of a few people makes the narration of the historical evolution of the discipline fragmentary and difficult to follow. The numerous breaks for the boxes fragment the reading and risk confusing the general picture. Moreover, the mixing between the referral of facts and sociological and epistemological considerations, written from the author’s perspective, compels a multi-level reading, which risks leaving pure knowledge of the individual works in the background. However, if one wishes to better know the leading personalities who have made the history of French parapsychology, without following in detail the history of the discipline in that country, nothing is better than the present book, which answers many questions but at the same time - and this is another one of its merits - raises others.

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