

GHOST HUNTERS: WILLIAM JAMES AND THE SEARCH FOR SCIENTIFIC PROOF OF LIFE AFTER DEATH by Deborah Blum. New York: Penguin Press, 2006. Pp. 370. \$25.95 (hardcover). ISBN 1-59420-090-4.

Like those of William James himself, science writer Deborah Blum's words are carefully chosen and almost lyrical in quality, making this book a quick and enjoyable read for parapsychology expert and novice alike. However, James is just one of the many players in this "Who's Who" of psychical research:

James' fellow ghost hunters included the codiscoverer of the theory of evolution, a physiologist from France who would win the Nobel Prize in Medicine, an Australian who became a founding member of the American Anthropological Society, a female mathematician who became principal of Cambridge University's first college for women, a pioneer in British utilitarian philosophy, and a trio of respected physicists.<sup>4</sup> (p. 6)

Specifically, the reader becomes familiar with Society for Psychical Research (SPR) founders Henry Sidgwick, Frederic Myers, and Edmund Gurney, as well as investigators including Alfred Russel Wallace (coauthor of the theory of natural selection), physicist and chemist William Crookes, aristocrat and future prime minister Arthur Balfour, mathematician Nora (Balfour) Sidgwick, physicist William Barrett (cofounder of the American SPR), "cheerful cynic" Richard Hodgson (p. 83), astronomer Simon Newcomb, postal inspector, author, and "skeptic in chief" Frank Podmore (p. 311), physicist (Sir) Oliver Lodge, physiologist Charles Richet, philosopher James Hyslop, and psychologist and publisher James McKeen Cattell. We also encounter mediums D.D. Home, the Fox Sisters, Florence Cook, Madame Blavatsky, Henry Slade, Leonora Piper, Eusapia Palladino, Rosina Thompson, and Helene Smith and skeptics John Tyndall, Hereward Carrington, and the Seybert Commission.

<sup>4</sup> In order: Alfred Russel Wallace, Charles Richet, Richard Hodgson, Nora Sidgwick, Henry Sidgwick, and William Barrett, William Crookes, and Oliver Lodge.

This book is not, however, an exhaustive review of the history of parapsychology; it is popular nonfiction written for a lay audience and provides a general overview of the beginnings of survival-of-consciousness research. It serves as a valuable introductory text for students new to this field and as an important tool for providing established researchers and scholars with a unique and personal perspective regarding the pioneers of the research.

*Ghost Hunters* follows a relatively chronological path but even when it jumps between continents, investigations, and players, Blum's knack for seamless transitions and her use of industrial, cultural, and scientific landmarks ensures a smooth ride. And although it treats the topic with objectivity and respect (despite its sensationalist title), *Ghost Hunters* reads in content like a stimulating tabloid: the reader learns about the investigators' personality quirks (e.g., Wallace liked to provoke and Crookes had trouble staying objective when a female medium was involved), physical appearances (e.g., "Hodgson was a big, burly, vigorous man with a fresh, ruddy face and a shock of sandy brown hair," p. 83), wardrobe choices (e.g., Gurney "wore his top hats high and his tailored suits with style," p. 54), drug use (e.g., James used chloroform and nitrous oxide, Gurney utilized laudanum, and Myers and Hodgson had tried hashish), as well as budding romances (e.g., "Sidgwick's attraction to Nora Balfour had continued to grow. Every time he met her, he liked her more," but he "had no idea of her affections. From her countenance, she might be politely indifferent, mildly friendly, or—he could only dream—simmering with hidden passion," p. 58). The narrative includes battles of wit, romantic affairs, alleged suicides, public scandals, and unrequited love.

During her research, Blum pored through materials including those found in the archives of the ASPR and in the Houghton Library at Harvard University. With its extensive inclusion of excerpts from the personal correspondences and sitting transcripts found there, *Ghost Hunters* gives the reader a "fly on the wall" perspective. Blum's citations and sources, however, are not always complete as this is not a scientific review. She states, "I have not provided citations for every brief quote, but only for the longer ones" (p. 328).

This book details the formation, investigations, and tribulations of both the British Society for Psychical Research (SPR) and American SPR (ASPR), which were "built by those who believed that objective and intelligent investigation could provide answers to the troubling

metaphysical questions of the time—and that those answers mattered" (p. 41). *Ghost Hunters* further examines the differences between the original and the American SPR. For example, while the SPR (whose initial members included Alfred, Lord Tennyson; Lewis Carroll; and Mark Twain) chose investigators based on their training as classical scholars, the ASPR opted to use only trained researchers in their investigations.

Blum also discusses the specific investigations and the mediums that were quickly exposed as frauds (e.g., Anna Eva Fay, Henry Slade, Florence Cook, the Davenport brothers, the Newcastle girls, and the residents of Lily Dale), the mediums whose possible abilities were retrospectively revoked through the exposure of fraudulent practices (e.g., the Fox sisters and Eusapia Palladino), and the mediums who repeatedly performed unexplainable feats (e.g., D.D. Home and Leonora Piper). And with not an independent review board to be found, the welfare of the mediums was rarely protected. For example, while Mrs. Piper remained in a trance state, investigator G. Stanley Hall dripped spirit of camphor into her mouth, causing blisters to form on her lips and tongue, and bruised her arm with an esthesiometer that tested for the sensation of pressure and resulted in the loss of the use of her hand for several days.

In addition to investigations of individual physical and trance mediums and crisis apparitions, the reader also learns about the examination of tools used for talking with the dead, including planchettes, slate writing, table tilting, séance cabinets, letter tiles, and “the talking board” (mass marketed as the “Ouija Board”) and other phenomena such as cross-correspondence, dream telepathy, rhabdomancy (divining rods), apports, psychometry, and the Willing Game, “a dinner party entertainment with a mind-reading twist—and a clever title. The rules were simple: after guests had gathered, one person would be chosen to leave the parlor” and a task would be chosen that “ideally, the chosen person would be ‘willed’” to do upon returning (p. 66).

Blum also details both the dismissive theories attempting to explain the phenomena (e.g., fraud, coincidence, mental illness, hallucination, delusion, overactive circulatory system, and selective memory) and the educated and objective (but not always accurate) hypotheses (e.g., psychokinesis, telepathy, creations of the subconscious, magnetic signals, a psychic force, a psychic reservoir, and survival of consciousness). Other phenomena secondary to the actual investigations were also observed. For example, William Barrett and Charles Richet suggested the use of hypnosis as a telepathy-conductive tool, Richet proposed a decline effect in mediums, and the importance of experimenter effects was seen in the investigations performed by Henry Sidgwick: “Everything seemed to flatten out when he appeared; knocks faltered, raps halted, spirits faded away. He always seemed to ‘paralyze the phenomena,’ he told his colleagues, and, depressingly, they agreed with him” (p. 83).

Perhaps the most important contribution *Ghost Hunters* makes to current psychical research is the underlying theme of how little has changed since the late 19th century (a comparison of which Blum herself is probably not aware). (The reader can decide whether that is encouraging or disheartening news about the state of the field.) For example, the investigators are part of a relatively small, interconnected community and

the research findings are dismissed outright by the mainstream scientific community without even the courtesy of their review. In her description of James's criticism of mainstream views, Blum paraphrases his observation: in their "determined orthodoxy, scientists had come to seem a mirror image of those clergymen who insisted on only one way of seeing the world" (p. 171). James, like any psychical researcher today, reminds the opposition that:

Science means, first of all, a certain dispassionate method. To suppose that it means a certain set of results that one should pin one's faith upon and hug forever is sadly to mistake its genius, and degrades the scientific body to the status of a cult. (p. 171)

James believed "it was past time... for science to open its mind" (p. 31). In addition, like today, scientists attempting objective investigation of psychical phenomena were ostracized by their mainstream counterparts: "Investigating supernatural events was off limits to scientists, unless the findings proved fraud. Those who chose to ignore the rule—unspoken but strictly enforced—would find themselves off limits as well" (p. 49).

Several of the early investigators believed in the importance of "the ordinary occult, experiences that unpredictably shadowed people's lives" and the SPR ran newspaper ads "soliciting personal stories of encounters with the otherworldly" (p. 80). As a result of the ensuing storm of letters, a phenomenon familiar to current researchers, Edmund Gurney spent his time writing dozens of replies each day.

Furthermore, the dichotomy between the interests of the general public and the focus of mainstream academics was as prevalent in the early days of the SPRs as it is today. The "most obvious successes" of early psychical research, "had been outside the halls of academia, in the more welcoming walks of popular culture" (p. 227). James, paraphrased by Blum, proposed an explanation for this: "If scientists did not afford some respect to the beliefs of the lay public ... there was little reason for the public to respect the pronouncements of [mainstream] science" (p. 26).

Even the state of our current conclusions remain similar to those of early psychical research. Blum quotes James's 1896 description of his study of "white crow" Mrs. Piper:

I cannot resist the conviction that knowledge appears which she has never gained by the ordinary waking use

of her eyes and ears and wits. What the source of this knowledge may be I know not, and have not the glimmer of an explanatory suggestion to make; but from admitting the fact of such evidence I can see no escape. (p. 206)

And, although far less eloquent, our conclusions from a recent study are

strikingly similar: “The present findings provide evidence for anomalous information reception but do not directly address what parapsychological mechanisms are involved in that reception” (Beischel & Schwartz, 2007).

James also feared how he would be remembered for his place in psychical research but remained true to the data:

Either I or the scientist is of course a fool ... with our opposite views of probability here ... I may be dooming myself to the pit in the eyes of better-judging posterity; I may be raising myself to honor; I am willing to take the risk, for what I shall write is my truth, as I now see it. (p. 313)

He, of course, was “raised to honor” in the eyes of future generations of psychical researchers (though perhaps “doomed to the pit” in those of some mainstream psychologists for his participation); it remains to be seen whether current researchers will exist in honor or in the pit in the eyes of future parapsychologists.

Overall, *Ghost Hunters* serves as an enjoyable journey through the initial stages of the two Societies for Psychical Research. The investigations included are objectively described, leaving readers to draw their own conclusions, and the researchers are portrayed as complete people, full of flaws and idiosyncrasies as well as genius and vision, allowing the reader to feel a personal connection with these pioneering scientists and their work.

#### REFERENCES

- BEISCHEL, J., & SCHWARTZ, G. E. (2007). Anomalous information reception by research mediums demonstrated using a novel triple-blind protocol. *EXPLORE: The Journal of Science & Healing*, 3(1), 23–27.

#### NOTE

Deborah Blum is a Pulitzer Prize winner and a professor of journalism at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. Outside of the US, Blum's book was published in 2007 and titled *Ghost Hunters: The Victorians and the Hunt for Proof of Life after Death*.

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