‘Whispers Shall Comfort Us from Out of the Dark’: British Spiritualism in the Wake of World War I

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British Spiritualism in the Wake of the First World War

The devastation of the Great War did much to vanquish Victorian idealism and convictions of national invincibility in Britain. The premature demise of millions of young men, the rapid development of new technologies, and the horrors of modern warfare brought Britain reeling into the twentieth century even as it transformed many aspects of its culture and society. One of these was Spiritualism, an established if oft-criticized movement which had permeated the European popular culture to varying extents since it was first imported from the United States in the early 1850s. Prior to 1914, Spiritualism had a well-deserved reputation for sensationalism: celebrity mediums received patronage from aristocrats and intelligentsia who were every bit as interested in cases of levitating tables, ectoplasm, and exploring the full potential of the human mind as they were in actually communicating with spirits in the afterlife. This Victorian Spiritualism is the brand with which both popular audiences and the relatively few historians who have produced scholarly work on the movement, focusing primarily on the years prior to 1914, are most familiar. With the advent of the First World War, a decidedly different and more somber Spiritualism began to emerge. The massive death toll wrought by the war and the subsequent influenza pandemic of 1918-19 led thousands of bereaved Britons to turn to the familiar and, I would argue, inherently optimistic cultural realm of Spiritualism as they sought to memorialize their dead through the 'living' mourning practice offered by séances and the spiritual reassurance that their beloved dead were not entirely gone from them. The movement itself experienced a popular revival and underwent dramatic shifts in ideology and practice, scarcely studied transformations which nevertheless reflected post-World War I religious, cultural, and social changes in Britain and the Western world as a whole.

My thesis will attempt to bridge a noticeable void in the historiography by focusing on
the revival of Spiritualism after the beginning of World War I. As such, I am primarily interested in exploring the ways in which Spiritualism changed in the years during and following the Great War. Specifically, I will argue that as a result of the horrors of the First World War British Spiritualism transformed from a sensational nineteenth-century cultural fad, a movement of intelligentsia disillusioned by a mid-Victorian Crisis of Faith and crowds eager to watch fully-materialized 'spirits' parade about, into a more somber and emotionally-charged attempt to reconnect with loved ones who died before reaching full adulthood and whose bodies were often never recovered from the battlefields on which they were killed. I will examine how Spiritualism and the séance functioned as a sort of 'living' mourning practice for the British people and how Spiritualist practices and beliefs may have provided individuals with an emotional connection to their deceased loved ones which more conventional religion did not.

Another of my more pertinent research questions regards Spiritualism's relationship with emerging egalitarian attitudes and social class transformation following the war, with especial attention to the universal and egalitarian natures of both Spiritualist social circles and the visions of the afterlife expressed in their writings. I will also engage in comparative analysis of post-World War I Spiritualist and occult revivals in other European countries, especially those of Germany and France, in order to characterize the revival in Britain. Was popular British Spiritualism more or less indicative of growing egalitarianism and changing social values than the occult movements of France, Germany, and the Soviet Union? How were Spiritualist doctrines and its adherents challenged in each country, to what extent, and by which cultural and religious institutions? In addressing each of these questions, I will attempt to frame my research findings within the larger context of the rapidly transforming, bereaved, and ideologically disillusioned post-World War I European society and culture.
I believe that post-World War I British Spiritualism is of great interest to wider audiences, firstly because it is somewhat obscure and secondly because its practices, aims, and beliefs are largely misconstrued. In particular, I think that lay readers may be surprised to learn that Spiritualism was never regarded by its adherents as the dark or macabre movement which it is conventionalized as today, but as an inherently optimistic, even idealistic one whose presence in society and culture extended far beyond the séance room. The contemporary detractors of Spiritualism (and several recent historians who have written on the subject) denounced its beliefs as irrational and morbid, yet what might be considered a rational response to mass trauma and death in a society so devastated by world war? Spiritualists viewed their faith as a ‘light in the darkness’ and death itself as merely a ‘transition’ to another world, one which was far more concrete and accessible than the afterlife professed by more conventional religion. While they did dwell on death and the dead, they did so with the intentions of consoling the bereaved and in some sense reuniting the families broken by the war and influenza epidemic. While Spiritualism is defined as the belief that the living can communicate with the dead, most Spiritualists were far more concerned with the living than with the spirits. Finally, the relationships between mass emotional trauma, shattered feelings of national invincibility, and spiritual and secular processes of mourning and commemoration are especially relevant to a post-9/11 American audience.

Historians have written sporadically about British Spiritualism over the past fifty years, often approaching the subject from diverse critical perspectives and drawing equally diverse conclusions. Geoffrey K. Nelson, in his 1969 book *Spiritualism and British Society*, was one of the first modern scholars to treat Spiritualism as a historical trend rather than as an anomaly or eccentric fringe movement. Nelson's book set the tone for later studies in that he was primarily concerned with late Victorian Spiritualism, whose origins he traced to an intellectual and
religious mid-Victorian crisis of faith. Of more recent note is Alex Owen's 1989 book The Darkened Room: Women, Spiritualism, and Power in Late Victorian England, which argues that Spiritualist society and the power politics of the séance room worked to subvert the typical gender conventions of nineteenth and early twentieth-century Britain by endowing female mediums with spiritual authority. Georgina A. Byrne's 2010 Modern Spiritualism and the Church of England, 1850-1939 examines Spiritualism's complex and often antagonistic relationship with the Anglican Church and the ways in which Spiritualism became part of a British common culture.

Byrne is one of comparatively few historians of Britain to have written about the Spiritualist revival in World War I and during the interwar years. With the recent exceptions of Jenny Hazelgrove, in her study Spiritualism and British Society between the Wars, and Jay Winter in his book Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning—which treats Spiritualism as a “deepening of Victorian sentiments” and one of many traditional methods of dealing with loss—historians who focus on Spiritualism have often concluded their studies with the year 1914. Mid-to-late-nineteenth-century Spiritualism has previously attracted much of the attention of both historians and popular audiences, whilst the 1914-1939 period represents a huge void in the historiography. The First World War also marks a period in history in which warfare and the devastating transformation of British culture which arguably wrecked havoc on Victorian convictions of invincibility and idealism seemingly overshadow table-levitating and holding hands in a darkened room.

Yet Spiritualism’s popularity positively exploded in the war and interwar years, and is crucial to understanding the post-World War I culture and mass bereavement of Britain and Europe as a whole. German historian Corinna Treitel’s recent treatment of the occult and
Spiritualist revival in Germany in the wake of the war, in her book *A Science for the Soul*, reveals a similar shift in focus from nineteenth-century Spiritualists' interests in "expanding the boundaries of the natural sciences" and exploring the human mind to the deeper emotional and more personal convictions which characterized the post-war revival. Meanwhile recent books and essay collections such as *The Occult in Russian and Soviet Culture*, edited by Bernice Glatzer Rosenthal, have begun after nearly a century of silence to explore how the occult influenced intellectual and cultural life in late nineteenth and twentieth century Russia. Studies of the post-war religious revivals of more mainstream faiths, such as Annette Becker's work on the revival of the Roman Catholic Church and its ideologies in the popular culture of 1914-18 and post-war France, have also informed historians' understandings of the intersections of religious faith and the Great War. Through consideration of the secondary literature on the First World War and religious faith, practices, and attitudes in general, I will consider more narrowly the extent to which the post-war British Spiritualist revival was unique, replicated in other countries, and a continuation or recasting of older values and beliefs.

I intend to extensively consult primary sources even as I build on what historians have written about both nineteenth-century British Spiritualism and what historians of other nations have written about the post-war occult revivals of other Western European countries, in order to determine what is most unique about and characteristic of the post-war Spiritualist revival in Britain. Many of my important primary sources are Spiritualist books written for popular audiences during and shortly after the Great War. Books such as Sir Oliver Lodge's *Raymond or Life and Death*, which went through an astonishing six editions in two months during the war, and spirit medium Wellesley Tudor Pole's *Private Dowding: the personal story of a soldier killed in battle* are filled with mediums' and prominent Spiritualists' accounts of their communications
with the spirits of young soldiers. That many of the 'spirits' who suffered violent deaths report peacefully transitioning to an idealistic afterlife which closely resembles pastoral England is of particular interest to me. Such descriptions reveal much about how Spiritualism functioned as a mourning practice which comforted and reassured the bereaved of their youthful dead's continued existence and even contentment as traditional religious mourning practices typically did not.

The Spiritualist belief in “post-mortem spiritual progress”, a term coined by Janet Oppenheim in her book *The Other World* to describe the conviction that the spirits of the dead could continue to improve themselves and even to age after death, is another concept which I am particularly interested in tracing through post-1914 Spiritualist literature. The idea that the spirits would continue to be productive citizens in the next life is perhaps indicative of a Protestant work ethic and uniquely ‘British’ world view. From my research, I have gathered that the actual spirit-world 'revelations' of Spiritualists have been somewhat under-utilized as sources by those historians who have treated Spiritualism. By examining popular Spiritualist literature more closely, I hope to gain a deeper understanding of the beliefs of not only prominent Spiritualists, but the everyday bereaved Britons who subscribed to or expressed interest in its practices and tenants. I will also look at the pamphlets and writings of those who opposed the Spiritualist revival on moral or religious grounds and who were often the first to connect, while defending their skepticism, the movement's renewed prevalence with the mass bereavement and horrors of the Great War. The institutions and people who opposed Spiritualism in Britain and in other Western European countries have much to reveal about what kinds of conventional religious attitudes and social institutions the occultists were perceived to be threatening.

Although I will look extensively at popular Spiritualist writings, the primary focus of my
thesis is not on the better-known Spiritualist careers of such prominent 'prophets' or spirit mediums, but on the ways in which Spiritualism reflected the traumatized post-war British society and culture. As such, my research will especially engage with newspaper and periodical sources, which reveal the most about the prevalence of Spiritualism and its role in the lives of working and middle-class Britons, many of whom had lost loved ones in the Great War or subsequent influenza pandemic. I am particularly interested in examining nineteenth-century and post-war Spiritualist periodicals with an eye for how the treatment of the movement and writers’ tone changes over time.

I believe that my research will help to shed light on a largely unexplored area of historical scholarship. Very few of the historians who have written about British Spiritualism have focused their studies on the years following 1914, or examined it in comparison with the post-war occult revivals in other parts of Europe. Those who have done so have often drawn the conclusion that Spiritualism experienced a revival in Britain and other warring nations during and after the Great War due to the unprecedented death toll of the fighting and the quest of the bereaved masses to connect with their dead loved ones once again. In my thesis, I am seeking to examine the movement's revival beyond this inference, and to place my comparisons of the practices and dogma of the Spiritualism of 1914-1939 with that of the Victorian period within the context of changing religious and social attitudes in Britain, as well as within the broader context of the emergence of modernism in culture throughout Europe.

Since I have begun to discover that post-World War I Spiritualism is a fascinating, seldom-explored, and relevant topic, I am interested in sharing my findings with larger audiences and in continuing my research as a graduate history student. I hope to present at the 2015 UNC Charlotte Graduate History Forum in March, by which time my thesis will be sufficiently
developed if not perfected. I am also interested in sharing my research at other regional conferences and in the possibility of submitting the polished thesis to historical journals for publication.

The Spiritualist movement and its proponents' claims about an afterlife where the dead were more than willing to communicate with and comfort their living loved ones were decried as dubious, if not blasphemous and unhealthy, by many of their contemporaries. Yet Spiritualists and mediums viewed their own activities in an overwhelmingly positive light. Many of adherents believed that Spiritualism was indeed what Spiritualist leader Sir Arthur Conan Doyle deemed "the new revelation", the beginning of an era when the living and the dead might communicate as easily as if they spoke on opposite ends of that revolutionary new invention, the telephone. In my thesis I intend to establish that Spiritualism in the wake of the First World War was by no means a fringe movement or a passing fad. The thousands of men and women who became passionately involved in Spiritualism and gathered together to attempt to peer beyond the veil to see their loved ones once more were creating a kind of living memorial to the dead even as they sought answers to larger religious and cultural questions which they no longer felt they had the answers to. Spiritualist writings, including those of the 'spirits' who through Spiritualists voiced radical ideas about the nature of the universe and the afterlife, have much to tell us about the emotional trauma and cultural mourning as well as the intellectual and religious quests which pervaded British culture in the years following the war which shook the Western world to its ideological core.
Selected Bibliography

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