

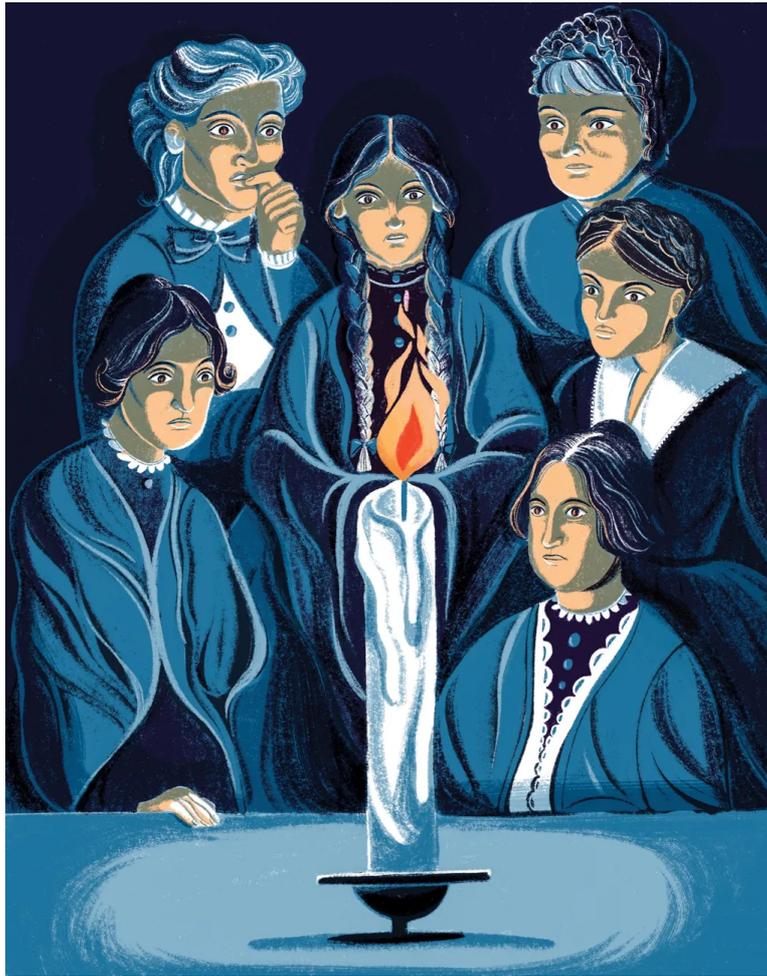
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# WHY DID SO MANY VICTORIANS TRY TO SPEAK WITH THE DEAD?

*Many explanations have been offered for Spiritualism, but  
the movement was more than a fad.*

**By Casey Cep**

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*Among its other effects, spiritual work gave women the chance to speak in public.* Illustration by Amanda Berglund



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**I**t's a good time to be dead—at least, if you want to keep in touch with the living. Almost a third of Americans say they have communicated with someone who has died, and they collectively spend more than two billion dollars a year for psychic services on platforms old and new. Instagram, Facebook, TikTok, television: whatever the medium, there's a medium. Like clairvoyants in centuries past, those of today also fill auditoriums, lecture halls, and retreats.

Historic camps such as Lily Dale, in New York, and Cassadaga, in Florida, are booming, with tens of thousands of people visiting every year to attend séances, worship, healing services, and readings. And many people turn up not every year but every week: there are more than a hundred Spiritualist churches in the United States, more than three hundred in the United Kingdom, and hundreds of others in more than thirty countries around the world. Such institutions hardly represent the full extent of Spiritualism's popularity, since the movement does not emphasize doctrines, dogmas, or creeds, and plenty of people hold spiritualist beliefs within other faith traditions or stand entirely outside organized religion.

The surging numbers are reminiscent of the late nineteenth century, when somewhere between four million and eleven million people identified as Spiritualists in the United States alone. Some of the leaders back then were hucksters, and some of the believers were easy marks, but the movement cannot be dismissed merely as a collision of the cunning and the credulous. Early Spiritualism attracted some of the great scientists of the day, including the physicists Marie and Pierre Curie, the evolutionary biologist Alfred Russel Wallace, and the psychologist William James, all of whom believed that modern scientific methods, far from standing in opposition to the spiritual realm, could finally prove its existence.

So culturally prevalent was Spiritualism at the time that even skeptics and dabblers felt compelled to explore it. Mark Twain, Frederick Douglass, and Queen Victoria all attended séances, and although plenty of people declined to attend so much as a single table-turning, the movement was hard to avoid; in the span of four decades, according to one estimate, a new book about Spiritualism was published roughly once a week. These included scientific-seeming tomes purporting to offer evidence of the afterlife, as well as wildly popular memoirs such as "Evenings at Home in Spiritual Séance" and "Shadow Land; or, Light from the Other Side." Meanwhile, more than a hundred American Spiritualist periodicals were in regular circulation, advertising public lectures and private séances in nearly eight hundred cities and towns across the country.

A recent spate of histories of the Spiritualist craze and biographies of some of its central characters have attempted to locate the movement's origins in various cultural, political, and

technological aspects of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. These accounts vary in both plausibility and persuasiveness, yet all of them are interesting—partly because of what they tell us about the Victorian era, but also because of what they suggest about the resurgence of Spiritualism today.

**B**ecause Spiritualism so strongly rejected hierarchy and orthodoxy, it is difficult to say exactly when or how it started. Plenty of scholars regard it as part of the larger religious efflorescence that began in the early nineteenth century in the area of New York State that became known as the Burned-Over District, which gave rise to the Second Great Awakening. Others, including Robert S. Cox, in his magisterial “Body and Soul: A Sympathetic History of American Spiritualism,” have looked far beyond that century and that countryside. This long view was also taken by one of Spiritualism’s first major historians, the novelist Arthur Conan Doyle, who became so zealous a believer that he set aside Sherlock Holmes in order to focus on his research, ultimately writing more than a dozen books on the subject. His two-volume “History of Spiritualism” starts by situating the movement as “the most important in the history of the world since the Christ episode,” then proposes the Swedish mystic Emanuel Swedenborg, born in the sixteen-eighties, and the Scottish reformer Edward Irving, born in 1792, as forerunners of the Victorians.

But most accounts of Spiritualism don’t begin with great men or distant precedents. They start with little women on an exact date: March 31, 1848. On that night, as Emily Midorikawa details in her new book, “Out of the Shadows: Six Visionary Victorian Women in Search of a Public Voice” (Counterpoint), two sisters, fourteen-year-old Margareta Fox and eleven-year-old Catherine, finally convinced some of their neighbors that an unsettling series of knockings and tappings in their home, near the south shore of Lake Ontario, was coming from the spirit world. Soon the whole town of Hydesville, New York, was gripped by the mysterious noises that haunted the Fox family.

Maggie and Kate, as the Fox sisters were known, claimed that they were able to communicate with the maker of those noises, which they said was a spirit called Mr. Splitfoot. From beyond

the grave, the spirit answered their questions, first rapping back to respond with a simple yes or no, then using a more complicated series of raps to indicate letters of the alphabet. In this manner, the spirit allegedly revealed that he had been murdered for money some five years previously and been buried in the cellar of the Fox house. That revelation only further excited the residents of Wayne County—no strangers to new religious claims, since they had already welcomed the Shakers at Sodus Bay, witnessed the founding of Mormonism at Palmyra, and lately outlived the doomsday prophecies of the nearby Millerites.

The Foxes fled their haunted home, but the rapping followed the girls into other houses during the next few months, and their sensational story continued to spread. In the fall of 1849, four hundred people gathered at Corinthian Hall, in nearby Rochester, where the Foxes demonstrated what they had advertised as “WONDERFUL PHENOMENA” for a paying audience—the first of many during the next forty years. William Lloyd Garrison and James Fenimore Cooper came for séances with the girls, and Horace Greeley and his wife, Mary, not only visited with the sisters but boosted their celebrity in Greeley’s newspapers, including the New-York *Daily Tribune*, which would go on to cover the Spiritualist craze as dozens and then hundreds of others claimed that they, too, were capable of hearing “spirit rapping.”

**A**ccording to Midorikawa, the Greeleys were representative of some of the earliest and most enthusiastic adherents of Spiritualism: affluent and progressive mothers and fathers who were desperate to communicate with sons and daughters who had died too young. In the mid-nineteenth century, an estimated twenty to forty per cent of children died before the age of five, and scholars often point to this fact to help account for the appeal of Spiritualism. But it was worse in the preceding centuries; for some time, the child mortality rate had been falling. What mattered more was that the average family size was shrinking, too, at the same time that modern ideas of childhood were taking hold—trends that combined to make the loss of any child seem that much more anguishing.

But it wasn’t only the death of children that brought people to Spiritualism, or kept them in the fold. Mary Todd Lincoln, who lost three of her four children, visited with mediums in

Georgetown before hosting her own séances in the Red Room of the White House. She also hired the country's most famous "spirit photographer" to take a picture of her with her husband after he was assassinated. Peter Manseau's "The Apparitionists: A Tale of Phantoms, Fraud, Photography, and the Man Who Captured Lincoln's Ghost" (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt) offers a fascinating account of that photographer, William H. Mumler, who worked as a jewelry engraver in Boston before taking a self-portrait that, when developed, revealed what became known as an "extra": in his case, a young girl sitting in a chair to his right, whom he recognized as a cousin who had died a dozen years before. Mourning portraits—paintings of the recently dead—had long been popular, but spirit photographs offered something more: not just the memorialization of lost loved ones but confirmation of life after death.

In the years following the Civil War, when around three-quarters of a million dead soldiers haunted the country, spirit photographs were in high demand. After Spiritualism migrated to Europe, its prominence there tracked loosely to war, too, with a spike following the First World War. Mumler alone took dozens of spirit photographs, in which deceased friends or relatives appeared behind or beside their living loved ones. Other photographers focussed on capturing active séances, table-turnings, acts of levitation, and even ectoplasm—spiritual substances that mediums "exteriorized" from their own bodies, often their mouths, noses, or ears, but sometimes their stomachs or vaginas. Such substances could be clear or dark, pasty or gauzy, shapeless or in the form of appendages or faces.

Technological explanations for the rise of Spiritualism often cite the development of photography, which at the time was an inherently spooky medium, in that it could show things that were not actually there. Although it can be hard to remember in the age of deep fakes, photography was initially thought of not as a manipulable art but as a mirrorlike representation of reality, which made its role in Spiritualism seem probative. Other technologies similarly seemed to bridge such unfathomable gaps that the one between this world and the next appeared certain to collapse as well. The telegraph, for instance, offered access to voices from the beyond; how far beyond was anyone's guess. The very word for those who could talk with spirits reflected all the new "mediums" through which information could be transmitted; spirit photographs were

marketed alongside spirit telegraphs, spirit fingerprints, and spirit typewriters. Inventors such as Nikola Tesla and Thomas Edison even tinkered with uncanny radios and spirit telephones, inspired by some of the disembodied voices of their own experiments and curious about the supernatural implications of electromagnetism and other universal energies.

Still, like the appeal to mortality rates, this account of the rise of Spiritualism goes only so far. For one thing, no notable uptick in spiritualist beliefs accompanied earlier technological upheavals, including the entire Industrial Revolution, even though it altered our sense of time and set all kinds of things spinning and moving in previously unimaginable ways. For another, some of the most popular Spiritualist technologies were some of the oldest: the Ouija board was simply a branded, pencil-less version of the planchette, and forms of planchette writing had been around for centuries.

The use of technology to document spiritual phenomena was of interest not only to believers but also to skeptics, who pored over images looking for cheesecloth passing as ectoplasm, overexposures masquerading as ghostly apparitions, and wires or pulleys that could account for rappings and table-turnings. In one of the most publicized attempts to test the claims of Spiritualists, *Scientific American* offered five thousand dollars in prize money to anyone who could produce psychic phenomena sufficient to convince a committee that consisted of academics from Harvard and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, psychic experts, and also Harry Houdini, who knew something about illusions and developed a sideline in exposing those which hucksters were trying to pass off as real. Armed with electroscopes and galvanometers, the committee tested all mediums who presented themselves for scrutiny, sometimes attending multiple séances before rendering a verdict.

Houdini's debunking of one famous medium, Mina Crandon, is thoroughly recounted in David Jaher's "[The Witch of Lime Street: Séance, Seduction, and Houdini in the Spirit World](#)" (Crown). Crandon was married to a prominent surgeon and attracted Boston's élite to her performances, channelling her dead brother's voice and even revealing his fingerprints from beyond the grave, while also levitating tables and producing ectoplasm from her mouth and from

between her legs, often while naked. (The backlash against Spiritualism, which came partly from the clergy, stemmed not only from its challenge to orthodox ideas about Heaven and Hell but also from its scandalous exhibitionism.) Crandon's case divided the *Scientific American* committee, with some members accusing others of having been sexually coerced into validating her fraud and even conspiring with her. Houdini had already exposed the deceptions of other mediums in his book "A Magician Among the Spirits," and he never relented in his effort to discredit Crandon, publishing an entire pamphlet detailing her tricks, and going so far as to incorporate some of them into his own stage act in order to demonstrate their fraudulence.

Houdini prevented Crandon from winning the *Scientific American* prize, but her fame only grew, and her case later splintered another group of researchers. The American Society for Psychical Research, founded in 1885, a few years after its British equivalent, was devoted to the investigation of spiritual phenomena, which the society considered as worthy of careful study as fossils or electricity. In "Ghost Hunters: William James and the Search for Scientific Proof of Life After Death" (Penguin), Deborah Blum records the society's investigations into everything from haunted houses to hypnotism. For the most part, those investigations only ever succeeded in disproving the phenomena they studied, but it was James, a founding member, who best articulated why they nonetheless continued their work. "If you wish to upset the law that all crows are black," he said, "you mustn't seek to show that no crows are; it is enough if you prove one single crow to be white."

"**M**y own white crow," James announced in that same address to the Society for Psychical Research, "is Mrs. Piper." He was referring to Leonora Piper, a Boston housewife turned trance medium who withstood years of testing and observation, her fees rising twenty-fold in the meantime and her fame extending all the way to England, where she went on tour. On one occasion, Piper impressed the James family by making contact with an aunt of

theirs. Asked about the elderly woman's health, the medium informed them that the woman had died earlier that day. "Why Aunt Kate's here," Piper said. "All around me I hear voices saying, 'Aunt Kate has come.'" The Jameses received a telegram a few hours later confirming Aunt Kate's death the night before.

Unlike Crandon, Piper was not fully discredited, though many people doubted her abilities, noting her failed readings and prophecies and offering convincing psychological explanations of those predictions and telepathic readings which seemed accurate. Her feats as a medium were not particular to the James family; in the course of her career, she claimed to channel, among others, Martin Luther and George Washington. As such efforts suggest, the allure of Spiritualism was not limited to consolation for the bereft: plenty of mediums worked as much in the tradition of the carnival barker as in that of the cleric, and Spiritualism was popular in part because it was entertaining. Its practitioners, some of them true connoisseurs of spectacle, promised not only reassurances about the well-being of the dearly departed but also new lines from Shakespeare and fresh wisdom from Plato.

Even more strikingly, from the perspective of the present day, early mediums offered encounters with the culturally dispossessed as well as with the culturally heralded. Piper, for instance, claimed to channel not only Washington and Luther but also a young Native American girl named Chlorine. And she was not alone in allegedly relaying the posthumous testimony of marginalized people. Enslaved African-Americans and displaced Native Americans were routinely channelled by mediums in New England and around the country. Whether race persisted in the afterlife was a matter of some dispute, but racially stereotyped and ethnically caricatured "spirit guides" were common, conjured with exaggerated dialects for audiences at séances and captured in sensational costumes by spirit photography. Flora Wellman, the mother of the novelist Jack London, claimed to channel a Native American chief called Plume; the Boston medium Mrs. J. H. Conant became associated with a young Piegan Blackfoot girl she called Vashti. Mediums with abolitionist sympathies passed on the stories of tortured slaves, while pro-slavery Spiritualists delivered messages of forgiveness from the same population and relayed visions of an afterlife where racial hierarchies were preserved.

For white mediums, communicating with spirits of other races could be a form of expiation, a way to confront violent histories and make cultural amends—or merely crude appropriation, garish performance art that was good for business. But Spiritualism was not only a white phenomenon. There were plenty of Black Spiritualists—including Sojourner Truth, who lived for a decade in the Spiritualist utopia of Harmonia before settling in Battle Creek, Michigan—and many Black mediums, including Paschal Beverly Randolph and Rebecca Cox Jackson, both of whom wrote books that included their work with spirits. Harriet E. Wilson, one of the first Black authors to publish a novel in the United States, later became a Spiritualist healer who was known, like some of her white counterparts, for summoning indigenous spirits, and who was described, in one of Boston's Spiritualist newspapers, as “the eloquent and earnest colored trance medium.”

The lines between syncretism and appropriation were often fuzzy. If the initial Victorian wave of Spiritualism had a distinctly American character, later iterations took on global influences, as when the theosophists incorporated elements of Eastern religions, including belief in reincarnation and past lives. Immigration and translation brought sacred literatures into renewed contact with one another—the Bardo Thodol handed to readers of the Zohar, the Vedas and the Upanishads circulating alongside Julian of Norwich and Meister Eckhart. Occult practices melded with culturally blurry techniques of meditating and altering consciousness, and the roots of the esotericism that would eventually be known as New Age took hold.

As a belief system, Spiritualism was largely free of the legal and moral strictures of orthodox religion. It made few demands on its practitioners, while offering them many rewards, from an uplifting and personalized vision of the afterlife to otherwise unavailable opportunities in this one. In its Victorian incarnation, Spiritualism had provided ways for female mediums to lead and to profit. The medium Annie Denton Cridge became a newspaper publisher and wrote one of the earliest feminist utopian novels, wherein the narrator dreams first of a matriarchal government on Mars that oppresses men, and then that America has a female President; Victoria Woodhull, a clairvoyant turned suffragist, became, with her sister, one of the first women to start a brokerage firm on Wall Street and, later, the first to actually run for President

of the United States; Emma Hardinge Britten, an opera-singing skeptic who set out to discredit the Spiritualists but ended up joining them, became one of the country's most popular public speakers and helped Abraham Lincoln win reelection. But they and other Spiritualists faced a cultural backlash almost immediately. The religion scholar Ann Braude's groundbreaking "Radical Spirits" (Beacon) situates spiritual work as social and political activism, since it gave women the opportunity to speak in public, and as a foundation of the women's-rights movement, since it demonstrated the equality of the sexes. Such a framing helps explain why Spiritualism became so ridiculed, and why its opponents sought to discredit its female leaders most vigorously.

**N**ot that those opponents needed a great deal of assistance. Much of the disillusionment came from the inside—including via the Fox sisters, the Hydesville girls credited with starting the Spiritualist craze. For years afterward, they entertained private gatherings and large public audiences in America and England. All the while, they endured examinations by physicians and gadflies, who strip-searched them, looking for bodily explanations or external assistance, and were attacked by mobs of Christians and secular skeptics alike, who threatened them with grenades and guns. Many people had tried to discredit them, but, in the end, they discredited themselves: in 1888, Maggie Fox, fulfilling the wishes of the late famous Arctic explorer Elisha Kane, whom she had allegedly married in secret, declared that the whole thing had been a hoax.

As Midorikawa recounts in "Out of the Shadows," a newspaper advertisement ran in New York City in October of that year announcing the "DEATH OF SPIRITUALISM" and promising "A THOROUGH AND COMPLETE EXPOSE." With her sister Kate watching from the audience, Maggie, now in her fifties, appeared onstage at the Academy of Music, on Fourteenth Street, put on a pair of glasses, and read from a prepared statement confessing "the greatest sorrow of my life": namely, that she and her sister had collaborated in "perpetrating the fraud of Spiritualism upon a too confiding public." After her reading ended, three doctors came to the stage and waited for her to begin cracking her big toe; each doctor then confirmed that the rappings were coming

from the clicking of her joints, which grew louder and louder until finally she shouted, “Spiritualism is a fraud from beginning to end!”

The scandal crossed the Atlantic faster than any steamship, and Spiritualists around the world reeled. A written confession followed the performance, describing how Kate “was the first to observe that by swishing her fingers she could produce certain noises with her knuckles and joints and that the same effect could be made with the toes,” and that after a great deal of practice the girls mastered making these noises in the dark. “Like most perplexing things when made clear, it is astonishing how easily it is done,” Maggie Fox said. But, the very next year, Fox recanted her recanting, leaving both sides to claim and reject the testimony of the sisters as they saw fit, a contest that was still unresolved when, a few years later, both sisters died poor.

Helped along by such scandals and the passage of time, Spiritualism eventually moved to the fringes. It became a kind of curiosity, a Victorian fad encountered chiefly in the biographies of artists such as Elizabeth Barrett Browning, who dabbled in mesmerism; in the footnotes to the modernist poetry of T. S. Eliot and W. B. Yeats, with their invocations of astrology, sorcery, and Madame Blavatsky; in museum exhibits of the mystical paintings of Hilma af Klint; in horror films like “Ouija” and “Things Heard & Seen.” Spiritualism is most often invoked only to be discredited, and cynical accounts routinely sneer at the sincerity or impugn the sanity of individual believers, unwilling or unable to imagine the appeal of a movement that dominated several decades of religious life both here and abroad.

Still, purely cynical accounts like those are dead ends—intellectual cul-de-sacs, bent on describing Spiritualism as a passing phenomenon when, in reality, the movement never really came or went. Necromancy had only just faded from cultural memory when Queen Victoria was born, and long after her death people with spiritualist beliefs continued to gather, as they still do, meeting regularly at the Golden Gate Spiritualist Church in San Francisco, the Swedenborg Chapel in Cambridge, the Summerland Church of Light on Long Island, and the Wimbledon Spiritualist Church in London, to say nothing of the nearly four million active spiritists in Brazil.

The flaw in most efforts to account for historical iterations of Spiritualism is that they look exclusively to transient features at the expense of more fundamental ones. It is true that today's Spiritualists have something in common with their Victorian predecessors, situated as they are in another era of rapid technological change and increasing secularization; the Internet and virtual reality are the present moment's photography and telegraphy, technologies so advanced that they approach the uncanny; then as now, a vast penumbra of proto-spiritualists surround the true believers. No longer persuaded by orthodox religious accounts but also not satisfied with pure materialism, they experiment with psychics, crystals, tarot, and astrological charts, or simply swap stories of the eerie and the unexplained.

But, if today's Spiritualists have much in common with the Victorians, they also have something in common with the ancient Romans, who celebrated the festival of Lemuria by making food

mortality has always inspired the dream of immortality, and the hopes that animated Victorian Spiritualism are eternal: to bridge the divide between ourselves and those we have lost, to know

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