

ESSAY REVIEW

Miracles and Modern Spiritualism: A Re-Review

On Miracles and Modern Spiritualism. Three Essays by Alfred Russel Wallace. London: James Burns, 1875. 236 pp. Free PDF at <http://books.google.com/books?id=7ZU0AAAAMAAJ&pg=PR1#v=onepage&q=&f=false> [Reprinted by General Books, 2010, \$21.09, ISBN 9780217265287]

About 1875, Modern Spiritualism in Britain attained a peak of cultural influence. In January 1874 William Crookes published “Notes of an Enquiry into the Phenomena called Spiritual during the Years 1870–1873” in his *Quarterly Journal of Science*, reaching positive conclusions and postulating the existence of a psychic force.

Another scientist was also reporting on his investigations. Alfred Russel Wallace, co-discoverer of evolution with Darwin, contributed “A Defence of Modern Spiritualism” to *The Fortnightly Review* in May 1874.

James Burns, a Spiritualist editor, publisher, and bookseller, gathered together Crookes’s writings on Spiritualism, to form a volume *Research into the Phenomena of Spiritualism* (1874) which was to be very influential. In March 1875, Burns enjoyed another coup when he issued *On Miracles and Modern Spiritualism. Three Essays* by Alfred Russel Wallace (*OMMS*). Although this was a much more comprehensive work than Crookes’, it has had less impact, perhaps because it did not include the kind of laboratory experiments which Crookes reported with the medium D. D. Home.

Nevertheless, *OMMS* was often reprinted, and has merits which still commend it to us today, which outweigh its disjointed origin. Wallace wrote clearly, and had a command of the literature, a background in science, and personal experience of the phenomena.

The first essay, “An Answer to the Arguments of Hume, Lecky and others against Miracles” (28 pages), had been read before the Dialectical Society in 1871. This London organization has largely vanished from history, except for its resolution on January 26, 1869, “to investigate the phenomena alleged to be Spiritual Manifestations, and to report thereon.”¹

The second essay, “The Scientific Aspect of the Supernatural” (102 pages), had a much longer history. It had first appeared serially in a journal, *The Leader*,

in 1866, and then promptly became as now a scarce pamphlet. Sections had been reused in *The Spiritualist* newspaper in 1871. It is worth noting that Wallace not only habitually reissued material, he also revised it. To the 1875 version of the essay, Wallace added "Notes of Personal Evidence." The 1866 essay may be seen as an argument for taking Spiritualism seriously.

Finally the paper "A Defence of Modern Spiritualism" (92 pages, including an appendix of the author's replies) had appeared in *The Fortnightly Review* in 1874 and been reprinted as far afield as Boston (USA) and Dunedin (New Zealand) before being revised for this book.

The content of the essays varied. The first essay was mainly philosophical and logical. The second was the nearest to a general survey of Spiritualism, including a section on its teaching. The third was chiefly a literature review.

In the first essay, Wallace discusses the philosopher David Hume whose definitions of Miracles had been very influential, and might be said to rule out the study of paranormal phenomena in advance.² Hume had argued that a uniform experience amounted to a proof that miracles did not happen, but Wallace gives many examples of testimony to miraculous events, by no means limited to Modern Spiritualism. Wallace also exposes the limitations to scientific rejection a priori, without investigation, of psychic evidence, with many examples of scientific error (e.g., "Sir Humphry Davy laughed at the idea of London ever being lighted with gas").

Wallace also takes issue with his contemporary, the historian William Lecky, who had attacked the belief in miracles, and had suggested that belief in the supernatural existed only when men were destitute of the critical spirit and when the notion of uniform law was as yet unborn. Wallace pointed to Joseph Glanvil as a critical mind who defended the supernatural.³

A third thinker whom Wallace challenges is the anthropologist Edward Tylor who had asserted that psychic beliefs were an example of the survival of savage thought.⁴ Many modern people, Wallace noted, can testify to the phenomena which cause such beliefs.

Wallace concludes this first essay by repeating that he seeks only to clear the ground of arguments supposed to disprove miracles and Spiritualism without examination. This he has done effectively, and in a clear way that the general reader can follow.

In the second essay, "The Scientific Aspect of the Supernatural," Wallace again makes some general points in defense of the miraculous, such as our limited knowledge of the laws of nature, and the possibility of ethereal intelligences of whose existence we are generally unaware. He calls attention to the good quality of the witnesses who testify to modern miraculous phenomena, and he claims:

during the eighteen years which have passed since the revival of a belief in the supernatural in America, not one single individual has carefully investigated the subject without accepting the reality of the phenomena, and while thousands have been converted to the belief not one adherent has been converted back from it. (p. 49)

This may be doubted, although uncertainty about how much investigation would be called “careful” offers a loophole. Certainly Dr. Carpenter, with whom Wallace had a long combat, was less than careful in his investigations, as Wallace was able to show in a number of rejoinders.⁵

This may be a suitable moment to recommend to all students of Wallace and of the history of psychical investigation the website conducted by Dr. Charles Smith known as the Alfred Russel Wallace page, which contains a vast amount of information about Wallace, including original writings: <http://people.wku.edu/charles.smith/index1.htm>

Others would question how much care Wallace himself took in his seance work. Moreover, it was one thing to accept the reality of the phenomena and another to be convinced of human spirit return, as Spiritualists believed. Pre-eminently, William Crookes was not so convinced at that time.

Wallace devotes a number of sections in the essay to citing eminent witnesses to various phenomena, including od-force, animal magnetism, clairvoyance, apparitions, and poltergeists, making particular use of Robert Dale Owen’s *Footfalls*.⁶

He calls attention to the Cideville, France, disturbances of 1850–1851,⁷ and to “the remarkable resemblance of the phenomena to those which had occurred a short time previously in America [i.e. Hydesville rappings], but had not in 1850 become much known in Europe.” He also compares them with the Epworth Parsonage case in the Wesley family, which was often recalled in the early days of Modern Spiritualism.

Wallace then moves on to quote witnesses to Spiritualist phenomena, choosing Augustus De Morgan, Robert Hare, and Judge Edmonds from science, though the first was primarily a mathematician and the last was a lawyer.

For literary and professional men, he selects T. Adolphus Trollope, James Gully, M.D., Col. Wilbraham, S. C. Hall, Nassau William Senior, Rev. William Kerr, Thackeray, Lord Lyndhurst, Archbishop Whateley, Dr. Elliotson, Captain Burton, and Professor Challis, who as an astronomer ought really to be in the previous chapter. But it may be said of nearly all these witnesses that neither their powers of observation nor their recordkeeping would meet the standards which would soon be sought by the Society for Psychical Research, founded in 1882.

Wallace then turns to a general discussion of the theory of Spiritualism, and the hypothesis of the existence of spirits. He discusses the possibility of continuity after death, and “the agency of beings of a like mental nature to ourselves—who are, in fact, ourselves—but one step advanced on the long journey through eternity” (p. 103). This continuity was a central theme in Wallace’s outlook for the rest of his life.

In the next section, “The Moral Teachings of Spiritualism,” he summarizes in a sympathetic manner the philosophy of Spiritualism: “There are no bad spirits but the spirits of bad men, and even the worst are surely if slowly progressing,” he notes (p. 109). Wallace over four pages quotes from an address by the medium Mrs. Emma Hardinge [who had actually married and added the surname “Britten” in 1870] who warns of “The effects of vice and ungoverned passions” (p. 112). It seems possible that Wallace had been significantly affected by Emma’s lectures; they may even have been a trigger for his 1866 essay, and caused him to consider the relationship between Evolution and Spiritualism.⁸

After some remarks on the nature of God, Wallace defends Spiritualism as having inspired thousands to devote their lives to good works.

In the 1875 edition of this essay, Wallace added “Notes of Personal Evidence.” These include his early experiences in mesmerism, his participation in a home circle, his sittings with a professional medium, Mrs. Marshall, and further experiments in the home circle, at some of which Miss Nichol (later a professional medium, better known as Mrs. Guppy) was the focus of phenomena. These personal experiences had now caused him to accept both the phenomena and the philosophy.

Whatever criticism we may make of Wallace as either witness or recorder of these events, his practical experience was much in excess of some of his critics.⁹

In the third essay, “A Defence of Modern Spiritualism,” Wallace first criticizes some recent treatments of the subject by popular and scientific writers, who have strong negative feelings but limited practical experience. He then gives a historical sketch of the origins of Spiritualism centered on the Misses Fox in Hydesville, New York, in 1848. Wallace here used such books as Robert Dale Owen’s *Footfalls* and Emma Hardinge’s *Modern American Spiritualism*. We have only recently realized that these accounts, like some other sacred narratives, had evolved away from the actual historical record.¹⁰

It has now been noted, for example, that the connection of the Fox sisters with the first phenomena was more limited than later reported, that the age of the sisters was uncertain, that the name of a supposed peddler who communicated was not in the original narrative, and so on. We may criticize Wallace for accepting the story as it had come down to him (Owen and Hardinge had both known the Fox sisters), but must recognize that although there were many in his

lifetime who accused the sisters of fraud, no one properly analyzed the history of the Fox story. The Spiritualists themselves did not enquire too closely.¹¹

In support of the facts of Spiritualism, Wallace then gives summary accounts of several mediums and researchers. Most of these remain neither exposed nor vindicated. Even Kate Fox (p. 156 ff.) who lived in England for a time, produced some phenomena that are hard to explain. One might assume that her materializations for Livermore, the New York banker (p. 157), were exploded long ago, but they have simply been forgotten. In contrast, the literature on the medium D. D. Home continues to expand steadily without a definitive blow to either medium or critics.¹²



ALFRED RUSSEL WALLACE

On the investigator side, Wallace was able to cite William Crookes' lately published work mentioned above. Here, too, a voluminous literature has left uncertainty. William Brock, in a magisterial biography, acquitted Crookes of fraud, but suggested he might have suffered from an eyesight problem.¹³

Another witness to phenomena, George Sexton, once a rationalist orator then a Spiritualist, was to become a Christian preacher for the rest of his life, though he does not appear to have repudiated his belief in mediumship.¹⁴

Wallace devotes a section to "Spirit-Photographs" (his use of a hyphen has not generally found favor), the supposed appearance of human spirits on photographs. Because of its physical nature, he was impressed by the evidential value of photographs, but, in retrospect, it was perhaps the most vulnerable part of his case. The most famous European photographer, Buguet, was arrested in Paris and convicted of fraud just after Wallace's book appeared.¹⁵

Fortunately, Wallace had used British photographic cases to make his case. But Mrs. Sidgwick exposed the limitations of these in 1891.¹⁶

Since then, although photographic images, most recently orbs, have continued to cause occasional puzzlement, the value of spirit photographs as survival evidence has been accepted by few.

In a section on "Historical Teachings of Spiritualism," Wallace briefly identifies mediumship in ancient Greece, the Bible, the lives of saints, and the witchcraft trails. He offers an explanation of the testimony to intercessory prayer given in *A Narrative of Some of the Lord's Dealings with George Müller, Written by Himself* (1860):

The perfect simplicity, faith, boundless charity, and goodness of George Müller, have enlisted in his cause beings of a like nature; and his mediumistic powers have enabled them to work for him by influencing others to send him money, food, clothes, &c., all arriving, as we should say, just in the nick of time. The numerous letters he received with these gifts, describing the sudden and uncontrollable impulse the donors felt to send him a certain definite sum at a certain fixed time, such being the exact sum he was in want of, and had prayed for, strikingly illustrates the nature of the power at work. (pp. 210–211)

As in the second essay, Wallace gives a sympathetic account of the “Moral Teachings of Spiritualism.” He draws attention to the consistencies of spirit teachings received in many places which are radically different from those of orthodox religion held by the medium or by the supposed communicators in life.

Finally in an appendix, Wallace crosses swords with Carpenter once more, adds a little more evidence, and responds to critics of his third paper. This ongoing discussion was characteristic of Wallace. In the *OMMS* third edition of 1901, he included, for example, chapters on apparitions and phantasms, and a new preface.

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This book was one of Wallace’s most durable. But its main readership has been Spiritualists, rather than psychical researchers or scientists. He wrote at a time when the psychic field was still, to a large extent, organizationally and ideologically undivided, except between those who accepted the phenomena and those who did not. Within months of the book appearing, The Theosophical Society had been formed in New York, which would develop a more critical view of Spiritualism in the light of a revived occult tradition. The rise of psychical research gradually emphasized the importance of the laboratory approach, championed by Crookes, rather than the natural history of Wallace.

Notes

- ¹ The ensuing *Report on Spiritualism* appeared as a book—London: Longmans, Green, Reader & Dyer, 1871; reprinted (slightly shortened) London: J. Burns, 1873; reprinted, London: Arno Press, 1976.
- ² “A miracle is a violation of the laws of nature” and also “A miracle is a transgression of a law of nature by a particular volition of the deity, or by the interposition of some invisible agent.” Wallace shows that both definitions are defective.
- ³ Henry Sidgwick, first president of the Society for Psychical Research, read Lecky, but was then led to take more seriously the evidence for medieval marvels. Interestingly, Lecky seems to have facilitated the inclusion of a dream case in an early SPR survey *Phantasms of the Living* (1886), being acquainted with the dreamer.
- ⁴ It is now known that Tylor was privately investigating the subject: Stocking, J., &

- George, W. (1971), Animism in theory and practice: E. B. Tylor's unpublished Notes on 'Spiritualism', *Man, New Series* 6(1), 88–104.
- ⁵ For example, Dr. Carpenter and Psychic Force, *The Spiritualist*, 15 February 1872. <http://www.wku.edu/~smithch/wallace/S206.htm>
- ⁶ Robert Dale Owen, *Footfalls on the Boundary of Another World*, London: Trubner, 1860.
- ⁷ A. Lang, The poltergeist at Cideville, *Proceedings of the Society for Psychical Research*, 41(xviii), 454–463. Cideville and Epworth remain in the case files of psychical research, still discussed but not generally accepted outside the research community.
- ⁸ Personal communication, Charles Smith.
- ⁹ Charles Smith comments in a personal communication to me: "I don't think it is true that Wallace was an observer only, as on some occasions he added constraints to the séance settings that were designed to eliminate fraud. This included both careful investigation of the physical layout of the settings, and adding slips of paper and such to detect forms of fraud-initiated movements of furniture, etc."
- ¹⁰ The re-evaluation is first apparent in Barbara Weisberg's *Talking to the Dead, Kate and Maggie Fox and the Rise of Spiritualism*, San Francisco: Harper, 2004, and in many articles in the online journal *Psypioneer* (archived at <http://www.woodlandway.org>) founded in 2004.
- ¹¹ Podmore (*Modern Spiritualism*, 1902) was aware of an 1848 report by E. E. Lewis (Mysterious Noises), who had interviewed witnesses at Hydesville, but did not obtain it himself. The Lewis report was reprinted by *Psypioneer* in April 2005.
- ¹² A good entry point is Peter Lamont's *The First Psychic* (2005). Dr. Lamont suggests that Home's phenomena are not yet fully understood, though he is confident that they were not paranormal.
- ¹³ *William Crookes (1832–1919) and the Commercialization of Science*, Aldershot, Hampshire, UK: Ashgate, 2008.
- ¹⁴ See Timothy Larsen's *Crisis of Doubt. Honest Faith in Nineteenth-Century England*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2006, Chapter 8, George Sexton.
- ¹⁵ In his recent study *Laboratories of Faith, Mesmerism, Spiritism, and Occultism in Modern France* (Ithaca/London: Cornell University Press, 2008) John Warne Monroe gives a detailed account of the Buguet case, using police records.
- ¹⁶ On spirit photographs: A reply to Mr. A. R. Wallace, *Proceedings of the Society for Psychical Research*, 1891, 268–289. After the First World War, it looked for a time as if spirit photography might make a comeback, but one of its main enthusiasts, Fred Barlow, lost faith. See Fred Barlow and W. Rampling Rose, Report on an investigation into spirit-photography, *Proceedings of the Society for Psychical Research*, 1933, 121–138.

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