

Anatomy of a Séance: a History of Spirit Communication in Central Canada By Stan McMullin

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Anatomy of a Séance: a History of Spirit Communication in Central Canada

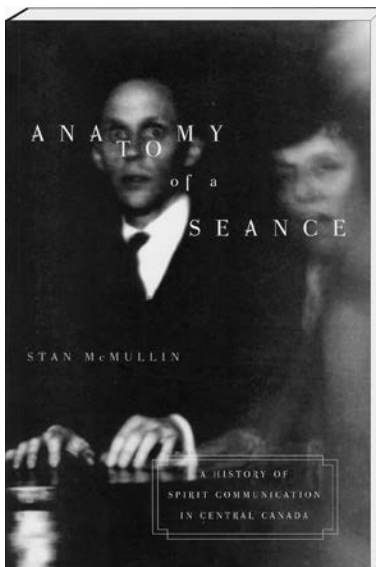
By Stan McMullin. Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2004. xxxiv + 260 pp. \$75.00 hardcover. ISBN 0-7735-2665-X. \$27.95 softcover. ISBN 0-7735-2716-8.

Spiritualism, a popular movement in which ordinary people made contact with spirits of the dead through mediums, flourished in Britain and North America from the mid-nineteenth century until well into the twentieth. Spiritualist claims and the unusual psychic phenomena associated with mediums were studied by the British and American Societies for Psychical Research founded in the early 1880s. Both spiritualism and psychical research have received a good deal of attention from American and British historians, but virtually none from Canadians. Stan McMullin's *Anatomy of a Séance* goes a good way toward filling that vacuum. Relying on several substantial collections of heretofore-unused archival materials, McMullin provides a history of the interconnected networks of spiritualists and psychical researchers in central Canada from before Confederation through to the middle of the twentieth century.

McMullin first encountered Canadian spiritualists some years ago while researching Walt Whitman, and then again later while doing research on William Lyon Mackenzie King. He hesitated to pursue these intriguing leads until he happened

rather serendipitously on the papers of F.J.T. Maines, minister of the Church of Divine Revelation in St Catharines, just as Maines's heirs were trying to decide what to do with his notes and papers on spiritualism and the occult. Included in the collection, now housed at the Dana Porter Library at the University of Waterloo, were extensive notes and transcripts of spiritualist séances held at Maines's church. Sometime thereafter a group in Kitchener brought boxes of séance notes generated by another medium, Thomas Lacey, to McMullin's office at the University of Waterloo; these were added to the Maines collection. And then McMullin discovered a third major collection, the papers of the psychical researcher T. Glen Hamilton, in the archives of the University of Manitoba.

The author admits that he found the notes of the séances mundane and uninteresting until, through another "stroke of luck," he acquired audiotapes of séances held in Kitchener over a five-year period during the 1960s and recorded by the participants for their own use. The tapes, in which McMullin could hear the exchanges between the sitters and the spirit entities channeled by the medium, brought the séance alive for him as a dramatic performance. "To listen to the range of the medium's voice as it shifted from masculine to feminine and through various shades of accent and delivery was unset-



ting for me on first encounter. ... For the [spiritualist] group, however, the phenomenon was totally appropriate as they easily identified each new [spirit] entity as a well-known personality.” (p. xiii)

McMullin’s focus on central Canada provides a fuller picture of the transnational spiritualist movement and the psychological researchers associated with it. As a movement largely indifferent to national borders, the Canadians relied heavily on outside resources. Though McMullin indicates that some Canadians did develop mediumistic abilities, they did not tend to publicize their abilities beyond their home circles due, largely, McMullin suggests, to the conservative character of the mainline Canadian churches and their resistance to such phenomena. McMullin breaks with much of the scholarship in his refusal to make a sharp distinction between spiritualists, who sought religious insight into the afterlife, and psychological researchers, who investigated psychic phenomena. Viewing this distinction as artificial, he examines a range of individuals and groups for whom the séance was a central institution.

McMullin’s most important contribution, however, arises from his use of methods derived from folklore studies to investigate the séances as oral performances. This approach, sparked by listening to the audiotapes, allows him to interpret the séances as a form of performance art. To really understand them within the context of the family and communities that hosted them, it is necessary, he argues, to move beyond the “séance notes” (the transcriptions of content) to the séance as performative process. As such, the séance room can be viewed as “a place of ongoing revelation.” (p. 224) The oral nature of the process – its “emphasis on teaching and lecturing rather than writing and reflecting” – explains its “lack of consistent theological content.” (p. 225) In the end McMullin suggests that the vision of spiritualists late in the nineteenth century and early in the twentieth has much in common with the virtual realities imagined by some contemporary science fiction writers. (p. 226)

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The Lady Lumberjack:

an annotated collection of Dorothea Mitchell's writings

Edited by Michel S. Beaulieu and Ronald N. Harpelle. Thunder Bay: Northern and Regional Studies Series, Vol. 12, Centre for Northern Studies, Lakehead University, 2005. xviii + 145 pp. \$23.39 softcover. ISBN 1-895939-26-7. ISSN 1183-6857.

Dorothea Mitchell (1877-1976) was one of many sturdy, spirited adventurers who undertook the trek from England to Canada at the start of the twentieth century. In 1904 she landed in Halifax

and gradually made her way to Hamilton, Toronto, and eventually the rugged regions of Northwestern Ontario. Michel Beaulieu and Ronald Harpelle utilize a number of Mitchell’s works to provide a much-needed first-hand female perspective of the pioneer experience. Because she wrote about her extraordinary life in such matter-of-fact terms, however, her contributions to the feminist movement (and to literature more generally) has been overlooked in the broader his-