Elizabeth Schleber Lowry


Modern spiritualism studies have changed dramatically since 1989, when Alex Owen lamented that historians had ‘virtually ignored the existence of the female believers who played such a vital part in spiritualist practice’ in order to pay a ‘disproportionate amount of attention’ to spiritualist men.¹ Now, thanks to the pioneering work of scholars like Owen and Anne Braude, the case is arguably reversed. Indeed, few studies of Anglo-American spiritualism published over the last decade have not taken women as their central focus: witness Marlene Tromp’s Altered States (2006), Tatiana Kontou’s Spiritualism and Women’s Writing (2009), and Jill Galvan’s The Sympathetic Medium (2010), among others. It requires no small amount of courage to step into this once barren but now crowded field, and for that Elizabeth Schleber Lowry’s Invisible Hosts is to be praised. It shifts focus from the séance to the autobiographic practices of female mediums, examining how four prominent female sensitives used their life writing to buttress their spiritual authority and legitimize their entrance into the public sphere. Lowry’s argument that spiritualism provided women with an admittedly compromised form of liberation from traditional gender roles draws upon and largely replicates Owen’s earlier conclusion; Lowry’s version of this thesis is solid, albeit not particularly startling. While Invisible Hosts will incrementally advance the field of spiritualist gender studies, it has not been crafted to radically transform it.

The four medium autobiographies studied here are Leah Fox Underhill’s Missing Link in Modern Spiritualism (1885), Nettie Colburn Maynard’s Was Abraham Lincoln a Spiritualist? (1891), Emma Hardinge Britten’s Autobiography of Emma Hardinge Britten (1900), and Amanda Theodosia Jones’s Psychic Autobiography (1910). The brevity of this primary source list accounts for the slimness of the volume, and is warranted, Lowry argues, by the fact that these are the only four book-length female medium autobiographies published in the second half of the nineteenth century. This justification feels somewhat procrustean, cutting off the often generically hybrid works of female-authored spiritualist testimonial which include significant portions of autobiography—Georgiana Houghton’s Evenings at Home in Spiritual Séance (1881) and Florence Marryat’s There is No Death (1891) come to mind—not to mention the many

¹ Alex Owen, The Darkened Room, ii.
shorter autobiographical essays and interviews which were a staple of the spiritualist press. The study takes a similarly restricted approach to previous studies of female spiritualist autobiography such as Miriam Wallraven’s *Women Writers and the Occult in Literature and Culture (2016)* and *Women, Madness, and Spiritualism* (2003), Roy Porter, Helen Nicholson, and Bridget Bennett’s edited collection of the life writings of three prominent Victorian women spiritualists incarcerated for their beliefs. Somewhat astonishingly, neither of these studies are even mentioned here. As a result, *Invisible Hosts* can sometimes feel claustrophobic in its approach to the wider field, shutting down rather than opening up the tricky question of what exactly constitutes “life writing” for subjects who, whether female or male, did not believe in death and often rejected conventional narrative forms.

The book is structured into seven short chapters which examine all four of the primary autobiographies in relation to different historical currents and discourses. Chapter one compares spiritualist autobiographies to their evangelical counterparts, examining the contrasting ways in which the two justify women’s entrance into the public sphere. The second chapter demonstrates how the book’s medium-autobiographers strove to absolve their spiritualist belief from the taint of Free Love by endorsing a discourse of Real Womanhood associated with purity and honesty. This leads in Chapter three to a discussion of their vexed relationship with Protestantism and in Chapter four to their performance of domesticity. Chapter five analyses the autobiographers’ canny and often commercial manipulation of male patronage to gain credibility, while Chapter six treats their simultaneous rejection of and dependence upon biologically determinist theories of gender. The study concludes with a final chapter which surveys the literary defences offered by its subjects for their travels on behalf of spiritualism.

There is much solid historical scholarship within these contents, and newcomers to the field will appreciate Lowry’s clarity of expression and useful summations of key events in spiritualist history. Yet the brevity of the chapters prevents them from developing polemic force, and as such their sequence can feel arbitrary rather than the necessary result of argumentative imperative. One longs for Lowry to offer a bolder and more provocative thesis that would bind all these parts together, or at least justify the order of their placement. *Invisible Hosts* instead favours safely denotative readings of its chosen

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2 Wallraven’s book includes an expanded version of her 2008 article, “‘A Mere Instrument’ or ‘Proud as Lucifer’? Self-Presentations in the Occult Autobiographies of Emma Hardinge Britten (1900) and Annie Besant (1893).’