

HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

Note on the Intellectual Work of William Stainton Moses

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Abstract—Most discussions about William Stainton Moses have focused on his mediumship. This note is a reminder that, in addition to mediumship, such as the spirit communication recorded in *Spirit Teachings* (1883), he contributed in other ways to the study of psychic phenomena, including studies of direct writing, materializations, and spirit photography. Furthermore, Moses wrote about apparitions of the living and out-of-body experiences, and veridical mediumistic communications, and criticized the writings of others, among them physiologist William B. Carpenter. A consideration of this and other neglected aspects of Moses' work, enlarges our view of his contributions to Nineteenth-Century British Spiritualism and psychical research.

Introduction

In a previous paper published in the *JSE*, I discussed the fact that some individuals connected to the history of psychical research are sometimes neglected in historical accounts (Alvarado 2012). I also mentioned that some historical figures are only partially remembered for aspects of their work, to the detriment of others. One example I briefly discussed, and which I would like to present more information about here, is William Stainton Moses.

Reverend William Stainton Moses (1839–1892) has generally been discussed as a medium (e.g., Myers 1894–1895, Tynn 2015). One of his best-known publications was his book about spirit communications *Spirit Teachings* (Moses 1883), which, like other writings, appeared under his pseudonym M. A. Oxon. My point in this note is to remind current readers of the somewhat forgotten fact that Moses's work on behalf of Spiritualism, and the study of psychic phenomena in general, consisted of more than his performances as a mental or physical medium.¹ He also contributed to the description and analysis of phenomena, and to the critique of theoretical ideas, some of which I will briefly summarize.

William Stainton Moses

Some Important Publications and Studies of William Stainton Moses

In addition to holding positions such as Vice-President of the Society for Psychical Research (SPR) and editor of the journal *Light*, Moses wrote about general issues related to Spiritualism. For example, in his *Higher Aspects of Spiritualism* (Moses 1880) had sections about the current state and the future of the movement in England, and about its religious aspects. He wished for better séance conditions that would not look suspicious, and this included “the abolition of all means of secluding the medium, and—though I do not lay so much stress on this—of dark circles also” (pp. 36–37). Of mediums, he further wrote:

instead of producing a number of astounding phenomena in the dark, would devote their powers to evolving a very few simple experiments in the light, the whole aspect of the matter would be changed. (Moses 1880:122)

A few years later, after he joined the SPR, Moses’s name appeared in the proceedings of the Society as one of the workers on the Literary Committee (e.g., Barrett et al. 1884). But his main intellectual work was published in other forums.

One of these forums was the journal *Human Nature*. Here Moses (1874a, 1874b, 1875c) published a series of articles about physical mediumship.² In the first one he focused on general developments and his own conviction in the phenomena. He wrote:

Most of the phenomena which have been evoked in this country have at different times come under my notice, and have been recorded by me, at the time, as carefully and accurately as has been possible. (Moses 1874a:99)

In other articles in the same series, he wrote about raps and movement of objects, the production of perfumes, and lights and music.

Most of the installments of this article were about spirit photography (Moses 1874b, 1875c). Moses accepted the reality of this phenomenon and stated that he was surprised that he found there was so much evidence on its behalf. He was convinced of spirit agency, but believed that in many cases the spirits involved were of a low moral order. Moses recommended students of the topic not to consider some cases produced by this agency that were suspicious, but instead to focus on clear-cut cases, and on those in which communication (presumably mediumistic) had shown the “reliability” and “truthfulness” of the spirits. However, he cautioned:

Experience, if it prove that some manifestations look tricky, proves also that “second thoughts are best,” and that some which appears at first sight most suspicious, turn out in the end to be suspicious only in appearance, but real and true in fact. (Moses 1875c:195)

In another long paper, Moses (1876–1877) presented discussions and classifications of cases of what he referred to as the “Trans-Corporeal Action of Spirit.” This included various cases of out-of-body experiences and of apparitions of the living. Moses wrote that the cases he presented here were scattered and in need of “classification and arrangement” (Moses 1876–1877:241). The cases, he stated, were arranged with a principle in mind.

The principle is the Transcorporeal Action of Spirit. The fact is the possession by man of a spirit which manifests its action in diverse ways irrespective of and beyond the power of the body. (Moses 1876–1877:241)

This action of the spirit beyond the confines of the body led Moses to argue the survival of that spirit after death.³

In *Psychography: A Treatise on One of the Objective Forms of Psychic or Spiritual Phenomena*, Moses (1878) reviewed the evidence for the phenomenon of direct writing obtained via mediums. He presented examples of cases attested by the senses (vision, hearing), cases presenting writing in languages unknown by the medium, and cases obtained in conditions preventing the previous preparation of writing to fake the phenomenon. In Moses’ view, psychography was only one of many phenomena

which testify to the existence of a soul in man, and to its independent action beyond his physical body; an earnest of its survival and independent life when released by death from its earthly prison-house. (Moses 1878:6)

Another book was *Spirit Identity*, in which Moses (1879) studied veridical mediumistic communications. This included personal experiences, and communications recorded by others. The author concluded: “Intelligence is perpetuated after the body is dead” (p. 69), and that the “human spirit after its separation from the body loses none of its individuality” (p. 70).

Moses was also very interested in the phenomenon of materialization. He published in *Light* one of the most detailed studies available of the varieties of features of this phenomenon and tests performed as they were recorded in the literature (Moses 1884–1886). Rather than be concerned with evidential considerations, Moses wrote:

My task is to sift by ordinary methods evidence already published, to classify and arrange it, to indicate its value as a contribution to the study of a very difficult problem, and, whenever I can, to illustrate from my own experience what I am quoting on the published authority of others. (Moses 1884–1886:9)

Some of the topics covered by Moses were appearances of inanimate objects (e.g., drapery, flowers), hands, faces, full forms (both shadowy and well-defined), as well as forms that were seen to dematerialize, and that were recognized. Furthermore, mention is made of the weighing of mediums and materialized forms.

Like the previous publications, this one about materializations presented a great number of references that are useful today to locate published discussions about this phenomenon. The cases referred to many mediums such as Florence Cook, William Eglinton, Kate Fox, Mary J. Hollis, Cecil Husk, Francis Ward Monck, Mary Showers, Henry Slade, Charles Williams, and C. E. Wood.

While Moses's articles were rich on descriptions of materializations, he also stated that little was known for certain about the process involved in their production, something he had stated a few years earlier (Moses 1877c). Nonetheless, he believed, as many did in his era, that the phenomenon involved forces processed through the medium's body.

Other Writings

Various other topics in articles include reports of séances for physical phenomena such as spirit photography (Moses 1875d), voices and materializations (Moses 1877e), cases of spirit identity (Moses 1885a), discussions about the defense of mediums (Moses 1877f), mental healing (Moses 1885b), and psychometry (Moses 1885c). Regarding psychometry, Moses wrote that he sent three writing samples from very different individuals to a psychometrist. The writing samples were dissimilar to each other and were only identified by numbers from one to three. Leaving aside some general statements, Moses said that he



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could have easily picked out half a dozen such specific statements in each, which were at once strikingly true of the writer, and quite inapplicable to the authors of the other writings sent by me. (Moses 1885c:217)

Although Moses was convinced of the reality of the human spirit, its survival of death, and of spirit agency as an explanation for phenomena, he reminded his fellow spiritualists about the resistance others had to these ideas. As he wrote:

I do not expect much from any attempt to force upon the present generation what it is quite unfit for. A study of the pages of the *Zoist* will shew how the objective, palpable facts of mesmerism, especially of healing of disease, advocated with infinite skill and courage, failed to make any permanent effect on a generation that did not want to believe them; that had no place for them in its mind, no use for them in the economy of its life. So it is with all these matters. There is a time and a place for them, and it is our business to have them ready when that conjunction occurs. (Moses 1884a:6)

Moses also admitted his inability to explain phenomena. Focusing on physical mediumship, he stated:

I do not know . . . how a rap is produced, how luminous bodies are created in the seance room, how in vacant space is built up before my eyes a body organised as my own . . . (Moses 1890:156)

But he had no doubt about the existence of these phenomena.

In addition, he criticized many of the critics of Spiritualism. This included Frederick George Lee and Asa Mahan (Moses 1875e), and Edwin Ray Lankaster (Moses 1876b). Another was the well-known William B. Carpenter (Moses 1877a, 1877b). Moses did not hold back his contempt for Carpenter's explanations of spiritualistic phenomena: "Dr. Carpenter seems either to write in reckless haste without understanding or grasping his subject, or to answer his opponents without ever reading their arguments" (Moses 1877a:532).

Moses was also critical of the SPR. For example, he wrote:

The Society for Psychical Research seems to be drifting into the attitude of the Sadducee, believing neither in angel nor spirit, but only in a sub-conscious self. That is a pity, but can do no particular harm, for angels and spirits will still persist in spite of denial. (Moses 1890:157)

In the September 17, 1881, issue of *Light*, Moses took over the responsibility of writing a column that lasted for several years and that

included summaries, commentaries, and critiques about publications, the phenomena, the issues, the critics, and the social aspects of Spiritualism. Regarding explanations of phenomena, in his first column he commented about narratives of stone-throwing, and theosophical ideas about them:

I have repeatedly seen phenomena which might far more reasonably be attributed to the gambols of a monkey than to the calculated malice of a fiend. These aimless antics, and many perplexing phenomena of a kindred nature, suggest Puck rather than Satan: a sub-human intelligence devoid of moral consciousness, rather than the serious attempts of a departed human Spirit to demonstrate its continued existence . . . It is extremely difficult to refer such pranks to departed human Spirits. Nor is it fair to say broadly that all Spiritualists assume this position. The present writer, speaking solely for himself, is free to confess that he has long felt it to be one of the most considerable stumbling-blocks in the way of intelligent acceptance of the creed of Spiritualism that such tricks should be put down to the action of our own departed friends. (Moses 1881:292)

Moses also compiled bibliographies (Moses 1889), and published many book reviews. This included comments about the books of Henry S. Olcott (Moses 1875a), Eugene Crowell (Moses 1876a), Hudson Tuttle (Moses 1877d), Alfred Percy Sinnett (Moses 1881), and Epes Sargent (Moses 1882). In an introduction to a book about mesmerism by William Gregory, Moses related the topic to Spiritualism:

The Mesmeric Trance, again, accidental or induced; the Ecstatic state, in which the mesmerised subject seems to enjoy communion with the world of spirit, and to live in a state sometimes entirely detached from the world of sense; will readily be seen to have their bearing on such experiences as those of Andrew Jackson Davis, and on the familiar state of Trance into which almost all well-developed psychics are accustomed to pass while utterances purporting to come from an alien spirit are made through their lips; or while their vital forces are being utilised for the production of such phenomena as, for instance, those of Materialisation, or Form-manifestation. (Moses 1884b:v)

Concluding Remarks

My discussion is certainly not complete, for I have omitted topics such as Moses' work in the organization of spiritualist organizations and his critiques of theosophical ideas. But I believe that the information I have presented shows that Moses had a wide range of interests and made many intellectual contributions to both Spiritualism and psychical research in addition to his work as a medium. Moses in fact reminds us of the multiple roles that some

figures played in Nineteenth-Century Spiritualism and psychical research.

Regardless of evidential and theoretical considerations, much of this work, particularly the publications about the “transcorporeal action of the spirit,” direct writing, mediumistic communications, and materializations (e.g., Moses 1876–1877, 1878, 1879, 1884–1886), remain valuable reference works to locate Nineteenth-Century publications about those topics.

Notes

- ¹ I do not want to play down the contributions of mediumship (and mediums) to the development of psychical research, a topic I have discussed elsewhere (Alvarado 2013).
- ² The first three articles were entitled “Researches in Spiritualism During the Years 1872–73” (1874a), while the rest appeared under the shorter title “Researches in Spiritualism” (1874b, 1875c).
- ³ See Moses’s (1875b) account of the photographs of his spirit while he was sleeping taken at a distance by controversial spirit photographer Édouard Isidore Buguet.

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