

BOOK REVIEW

The Afterlife Explorers, Volume 1: The Pioneers of Psychical Research by Michael Tymn. Hove, UK: White Crow Books, 2011. xix + 148 pp. £9.99 (paperback) ISBN: 978-1-908733-00-9.

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Afterlife explorers are, for Michael Tymn, people who actively sought and ‘found’ “evidence of man’s survival after death” (p. ix) during the period from the mid-1800s to the 1930s. After that period, psychical research “changed its focus (. . .) to research in extra-sensory perception (ESP) and related psychic phenomena” (p. x), especially because scientists and scholars “began to realize that they . . . would never succeed in producing evidence to satisfy either the scientific fundamentalists or the religious fundamentalists” (p. ix). So, to write an overview of what he calls “exploration” of the afterlife, Tymn organizes the topic into twelve portraits, in which, in addition to brief hints about the individuals he intends to analyze, he offers quotes from works they published or that have been published about them.

The book opens with a Preface and an Introduction, where the author explains that the present volume is the first of four, which solely concerns the epoch before 1882. That date was chosen as a “turning point” because it was marked by the founding of the Society for Psychical Research (SPR), which began the modern way of exploring the realm of the occult. The author is convinced that to trace back the origin of psychical research, admittedly under other names, we can move far back in time to medieval “investigations” by the Church of alleged miracles. For the later part of the period, he refers to the works of Swedenborg (second half of 18th century) and Kerner (early 19th century), true precursors, according to him, of the Rochester knockings connected to the Fox sisters, in turn a “seminal event that gave rise to the advent of ‘modern’ psychical research” (p. xii). Subsequently, other individuals took care of, and studied, mediumship, often moving from skeptical positions to become “believer(s) in the reality of mediumship and in spirit communication” (p. xv). One of these, the physicist William Barrett, was the driving force for the establishment of the SPR and the ASPR (American Society for Psychical Research). A timeline, starting from Emanuel Swedenborg’s personal investigation of afterlife

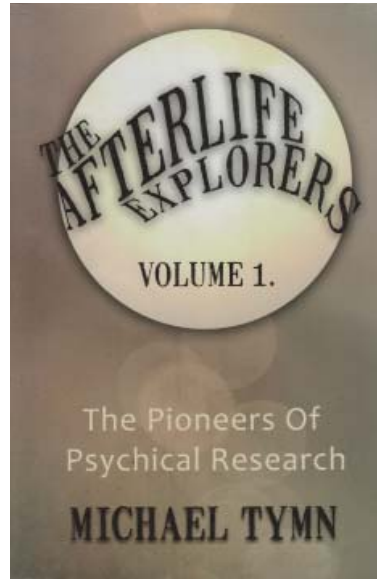
realms in 1741, until the “organization of the SPR” in 1882, delimits the timespan covered in this volume.

Each of the twelve chapters is dedicated to one person: E. Swedenborg, A. J. Davis, J. W. Edmonds, G. T. Dexter, N. P. Tallmage, R. Hare, V. Hugo, A. Kardec, A. R. Wallace, D. D. Home, W. Crookes, and W. S. Moses. Most of the biographical sketches include some quotes from the person’s works, and a detailed description of an event of “close contact” with spirits. Each chapter ends with quotes of statements proposed by those authors or their “spirits” regarding a few matters considered important by Tymn. In this repertoire, the choice is usually

different from one author to another, so that we have, for example, for George Dexter, quotes on “Purpose,” “Liberation,” “Benefits,” “Positive Influence”; for Victor Hugo, “Spirit Presence,” “Doubt Necessary,” “Spirit Awareness”; for William Stainton Moses, “Conflicts with Christianity,” “Spirit Language,” “Subconscious Explanation”; and so on.

Lastly, four Appendices contain “teachings” believed to have come from prominent spirits, excerpted from the published books of A. J. Davis, J. W. Edmonds and G. T. Dexter, Allan Kardec, and W. Stainton Moses.

Although useful to quickly get an idea of the way in which concepts and doctrine developed in Spiritism in the period under examination, the book possesses some weaknesses. First of all, from a historical point of view it risks giving an incorrect idea of what psychical research really has been and is now: a discipline, started in the last two decades of the nineteenth century, that tries to clarify through cautious and strict investigations the occurrence, true nature, and governing rules of anomalous psychic phenomena. By including in psychical research attempts to find evidence of “life beyond death,” confusion is created. And by ascribing authors to the field, as Tymn does, who are certainly unrelated to that discipline, as are seers and mediums (E. Swedenborg, D. D. Home, etc.), literate men who were not researchers (e.g., Victor Hugo), spiritual leaders (Allan Kardec, W. S. Moses), and others, it obfuscates the fact that for decades psychical researchers have primarily studied psychic phenomena such as (seeming) telepathic, precognitive, and clairvoyant experiences, poltergeists, hauntings, and much less so



mediumship. Not to say that the very first activity of the SPR was marked by the decision to not assume a corporate position on the afterlife and mediumistic phenomena (as well on other phenomena) until clear evidence had emerged in this regard—and even today has not emerged.

Even from a fideistic perspective, however, Tynn's work shows flaws, because it is completely silent on questions one could ask while reading the book. In the first place, the author explicitly affirms, or refers to, the importance of becoming convinced *during the present life* of the survival of bodily death: but he never says why this would be important. Perhaps to believe in survival guarantees survival or a *better survival* more than if one does not believe? Or could that faith provide us (better) guidance on how to behave now in a certain way? (Which?) Moreover, considering that the vast majority of human beings already believe in survival (as followers of one of the world religions), it is not clear how faith in survival announced by a few mediums should or could have relevance.

On the other hand, it seems risky to include among the scouts of the afterlife Sir William Crookes, a scientist who has performed studies on the physical phenomena of Daniel Dunglas Home, and this renowned medium, too, who has produced very scarce “communications,” of either ethical or philosophical value, apparently coming from the spirit world.

Finally, it should be noted that at no point in the volume does Tynn state the reasons for his belief in the *reliability* of the quotes he reports. It must be specified that he does not alter any of the materials he takes into consideration and uses; but to solely refer to the professional honesty or to a vague “authority” for the people he chooses is not enough to make them acceptable.

In other words, how do we know that the assertions for example of Nathaniel Tallmage or of Robert Hare on the afterlife and the meaning of life correspond to any reality? Why are the claims of Allan Kardec or Stainton Moses, or those of the alleged spirits communicating through them, important or *more important* than those of any other person who may have said otherwise? The lack of a clear discussion on the reliability of all that is presented represents a main weakness of this work.

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