

# Practising Medicine and Spiritualism in the 1860s: Sacred Encounters of Drs. Moses Colby and Susan Kilborn as “Lived Religion”

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*Spiritualism was not at all uncommon in the nineteenth century, during a time of social and intellectual turmoil, when old beliefs were being challenged and new orthodoxies had not yet emerged. To its nineteenth-century practitioners, spiritualism was both a religion and a science. As competing theories on the nature of illness and the body pitted orthodox physicians against “irregular” practitioners, the popularity of “medical mediums” made spiritualism a source of destabilization not only in religion, but also in medicine. Examined through the lens of “lived religion,” the unconventional collaboration of Dr. Susan Kilborn with her late mentor, Dr. Moses Colby, through a spiritualist medium reveals how sacred presence could be experienced in mind and body by scientifically trained Protestants. In its strangeness, but also in its ordinariness as lived experience, this case study offers both a problem and an opportunity in the ongoing quest to rethink religious history in Canada.*

*Le spiritisme n'avait rien d'inusité au XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle, une époque de turbulences sociales intellectuelles où les vieilles croyances étaient contestées et les nouvelles orthodoxies n'avaient pas vu le jour. Pour ses praticiens du XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle, le spiritisme était à la fois une religion et une science. Tandis que les théories concurrentes sur la nature de la maladie et du corps opposaient les médecins orthodoxes aux praticiens « irréguliers », la popularité des « médiums médicaux » faisait du spiritisme un facteur de déstabilisation non seulement de la religion, mais également de la médecine. Vue par le prisme de la « religion vécue », la collaboration non conventionnelle qu'entretenaient la D<sup>re</sup> Susan Kilborn et le D<sup>r</sup> Moses Colby, son défunt mentor, par l'entremise d'un médium en spiritisme révèle comment les scientifiques protestants pouvaient ressentir la présence du sacré par l'esprit et le corps. Non seulement par son étrangeté, mais également par son caractère ordinaire d'expérience vécue,*

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*cette étude de cas présente à la fois un problème et une occasion d'aller plus loin dans la quête perpétuelle de repenser l'histoire de la religion au Canada.*

Miss Susan L. Kilborn has been under my instruction for four years past. She has displayed great aptitude for medical study and has attained professional skill in the practice of many branches of the profession. Every aid and encouragement should be given to one who is so distinguished for talent, zeal and humanity.<sup>1</sup>

ARMED with this commendation from her mentor, Moses F. Colby, MD, of Stanstead, Canada East, Susan Kilborn (1815–1868), single, strong-minded, restless, and in her mid-forties, intended to head south to Boston to seek further medical training.<sup>2</sup> The year was 1861, more than three decades before Maude Abbott, recognized as the first woman to graduate in medicine in Quebec, obtained her degree in 1894 from Bishop's Medical College in Montreal. Kilborn's absence from the canon of early women professionals in Canada is not surprising. Like many women of her day, she left few personal papers. Her training was irregular, and there is no record that she ever received a medical degree. Unlike Emily Howard Jennings Stowe and Jennie Kidd Trout, who are acknowledged as the first female physicians in Canada and who graduated from American medical colleges, Kilborn followed an apprenticeship and thereafter moved from Quebec to the United States to practise. Furthermore, her interest in combining spiritualism with medicine may make her a dubious candidate in the ranks of early Canadian women physicians.<sup>3</sup> The recent discovery of a small cache consisting of

1 Stanstead, QC, Fonds Colby [FC], MFC Papers, Series 3, Box 1:1:8, Moses Colby, April 15, 1861. The usual requirement for medical school at the time was not an entrance exam or high school diploma, but a letter of recommendation from a respectable physician, presumably the preceptor, stating the person was of good moral character and had studied medicine in apprenticeship for three years. Naomi Rogers, *An Alternative Path: The Making and Remaking of Hahnemann Medical College and Hospital of Philadelphia* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press 1998), p. 22. Kilborn's formal education prior to her apprenticeship had been at the elementary Rock Island School, where she is listed in attendance in March 1831, and probably thereafter at the Stanstead Seminary, of which her father was one of the promoters and which opened its doors in 1830. Kathleen Brown, *Schooling in the Clearings* (Stanstead: Stanstead Historical Society 2001); Joan MacDonald, *The Stanstead College Story* (Stanstead: Board of Trustees 1977), pp. 1–7.

2 “[T]he almighty will implanted in me, together with the restlessness which I inherited from my father, forbids ease of body” (Wellesley, MA, Wellesley Historical Society [hereafter WHS], Denton Family [hereafter DF] Papers, Susan Kilborn to Elizabeth Foote Denton, January 29, [1864?]).

3 The only published account of Kilborn is Aileen Desbarats, “Introducing Susanna Kilborn, MD from Stanstead, Canada East,” *Stanstead Historical Journal*, vol. 20 (2003), pp. 41–48. I thank the author and her colleague, Dr. Maurice Langlois, for their important preliminary work on Kilborn. Their concern that Kilborn's interest in spiritualism receive historical attention has led to the present study. Emily Howard Jennings Stowe and Jennie Kidd Trout graduated in 1867 and 1875

some letters, notices of her practice, and a handwritten manuscript within the papers of nineteenth-century New England social reformer Elizabeth Foote Denton has finally brought to light this unconventional woman.

It was Denton who authored the obituary published in the *Boston Commonwealth* and copied in the *Stanstead Journal* following Kilborn's death at age 53.<sup>4</sup> Describing her as a woman "blest with rare mental capabilities," Denton noted that Kilborn had almost finished preparing for the press a work encapsulating years of research into the causes of insanity, research based on the theory and diligent investigation "of her late honored and lamented instructor, M.F. Colby, A.M., M.D., from whom she had received it, and whose deep devotion to his profession gave him the right to be heard." From the much more fully documented life of Moses Colby, it is known that, shortly before his death in 1863, he indeed had asked Kilborn to take on the task of updating and finding a publisher for a lengthy manuscript containing his findings into connections between insanity, nervous diseases, and disorders of the digestive system.<sup>5</sup>

However, the manuscript discovered among Kilborn's papers turned out to be something entirely different. Spanning a period from December 1867 to mid-January 1868 and written by Kilborn, it recounts her encounter with a female medium. Contacted by and communicating with the spirit of the late Dr. Colby, she set out to complete the long-awaited revisions of the manuscript.<sup>6</sup> From the narrative, supplemented by letters and notes, it is evident that not only had this unfinished task been weighing heavily on Kilborn, but also that she was gravely ill and treating herself for liver disease.<sup>7</sup> Less than a year later she died. Dyspepsia was the registered cause of death.

It is tempting to ascribe the bizarre account of Kilborn's relationship with a spiritualist medium simply to illness and depression, but such an interpretation overlooks the rich social and religious context and the multi-faceted dimensions of this story. Drawing on recent literature that rethinks the relationship between science and spiritualism not as foes but as allies in the mid-nineteenth century, I propose to examine through the lens of "lived religion" the unconventional collaboration

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respectively. Their stories and those of their successors are the focus of Charlotte Hacker, *Indomitable Lady Doctors* (Toronto: Clarke Irwin 1974). For Maude Abbott, see pp. 149–66.

4 Her obituary (*Stanstead Journal*, December 17, 1868) states she was in her 52nd year, but the *Registry of Deaths for Needham, Commonwealth of Mass.* (volume 212, 1868, p. 266) gives her age at death as 55 years, 7 months, 6 days. I have taken the age given on her tombstone in the Crystal Lake Cemetery, Stanstead. The notice of death states her occupation as "physician." Needham formally became Wellesley in 1881.

5 FC, MFC Papers, Series 3, Box 4:2, Moses Colby to Susan Kilborn, n.d. [1862].

6 WHS, DF Papers, mss. of Miss Kilborn, December 11, 1867, 47 pp. Also available as transcript by Dr. M. Langlois, Stanstead Historical Society, Colby-Curtis Museum, Stanstead.

7 WHS, DF Papers, Kilborn File 88B.

between Kilborn, a spiritualist medium, and Moses Colby. Emerging from the work of cultural historians such as Carlo Ginzberg, Robert Orsi, and David Hall, “lived religion” does not assume ecclesiastically defined traditions as normative. Instead, it moves behind the study of religious leadership, institutions, and doctrines to draw attention to the ways women and men have themselves shaped religion in everyday life.<sup>8</sup> As lived experience, religion is not seen as distinct from aspects of life deemed “profane” but rather, suggests Orsi, it “comes into being in an ongoing, dynamic relationship with the realities of everyday life.” Because of this, consideration must be given to the cultural limits of what people could imagine, desire, or fantasize, as well as to their sensory world, or knowledges of the body. Equally important are the structures of social experience and, above all, the ways whereby people addressed accompanying tensions and contradictions.<sup>9</sup> In applying this definition of religion to the interface of spiritualism and medicine in the Colby/Kilborn encounter, I draw attention to the ways whereby sacred presence could be experienced in mind and body not only by devout Roman Catholics, as is well known, but also by scientifically trained Protestants. In its strangeness, but also in its ordinariness as lived experience, this case study offers both a problem and an opportunity in the ongoing quest to rethink and rewrite religious history in Canada.

Spiritualism, or communicating with the spirits of the deceased because of the assumed proximity of a spirit world to the material world, was not at all uncommon in the nineteenth century. Although its origins in the United States can be traced to the earliest days of contact between Native American, European, and African cultures, so-called “modern spiritualism” began in 1848 with the unusual rappings said to have been experienced by three adolescent sisters of the Fox family, recently moved to Hydesville, New York, from Consecon, Canada West. By 1852 it had crossed the Atlantic to Britain through American medium Maria Hayden, where it drew considerable interest, including from such well-placed public figures as Queen Victoria, Gladstone, Thackeray, and Dickens.<sup>10</sup> Intensified by the large-scale loss of loved ones during the

8 Robert Orsi, *Between Heaven and Earth: The Religious World People Make and the Scholars Who Study Them* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005); Laurie F. Maffly-Kipp, Leigh Eric Schmidt, and Mark Valeri, eds., *Practicing Protestants: Histories of Christian Life in America, 1630–1965* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006); David D. Hall, ed., *Lived Religion in America* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997); Carlo Ginzberg, *The Cheese and the Worms: The Cosmos of a Sixteenth-century Miller*, John and Anne Tedeschi, trans. (Penguin, 1982).

9 Robert Orsi, “Everyday Miracles: The Study of Lived Religion,” in Hall, ed., *Lived Religion in America*, p. 7.

10 For a brief description of the origins and trans-Atlantic expansion of spiritualism, see Bridget Bennett, *Transatlantic Spiritualism in Nineteenth-Century American Literature* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan 2007), pp. 1–24.

American Civil and First World wars, the extravagant claim that it was possible for the living to communicate with the dead continued to attract a following well into the twentieth century.<sup>11</sup>

A protean phenomenon, part religion, part science, and part entertainment, spiritualism was never a single authorized or defined movement, and its multiple facets have been the subject of considerable research.<sup>12</sup> In the only full-length academic study of spiritualism in Canada, Stan McMullin points out that, to its nineteenth-century practitioners, spiritualism was both a religion and a science. While it overlapped with the religious revivalism of the day, it also tested and challenged the boundaries of traditional Victorian Protestantism.<sup>13</sup> These boundaries were tensile, and, as a recent British study has demonstrated, spiritualism flourished in an atmosphere in which theological debates about the nature and duration of eternal punishment, combined with popular concern about the fate of the dead, were making room for more optimistic views about the human condition and the nature of the afterlife.<sup>14</sup> Under the label “modern,” spiritualism was considered by its North American practitioners as a progressive form of Christianity with unlimited potential for moral and social reform.<sup>15</sup> In an age of scientific interest and experimentation, some placed spiritualism’s promise of psychic evolution on the cutting edge of new knowledge; in 1854, only eight years after spiritualism broke upon the scene, a petition with 13,000 signatures was presented to the United States Senate, asking

11 An investigative committee established in 1939 by the Archbishop of Canterbury reported that in England the National Spiritualist Union claimed 520 local societies serving some 160,000 people, with thousands more attending seances, visiting spiritualist lecturers, and reading about spiritualism in the newspapers. Georgina Byrne, “‘Angels Seen Today’: The Theology of Modern Spiritualism and its Impact on Church of England Clergy, 1852–1939” in Peter Clarke and Tony Laydon, eds., *The Church, the Afterlife and the Fate of the Soul* (Woodbridge, UK, and Rochester, NY: Published for the Ecclesiastical Historical Society by the Boydell Press, 2009), pp. 360–361.

12 As a prominent theme in Victorian literature, spirit possession has been seen as a component of themes as diverse as an “extra” sphere in liberal state formation and as a zone of cross-cultural contact. Sarah Willburd, *Possessed Victorians: Extra Spheres in Nineteenth-Century Mystical Writing* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2006); John J. Kuchich, *Ghostly Communion: Cross-Cultural Spiritualism in Nineteenth-Century Literature* (Hanover, NH: Dartmouth College Press 2004).

13 Stan McMullin, *Anatomy of a Séance: A History of Spirit Communication in Central Canada* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press 2004), pp. 3–31. The Roman Catholic Church, on the other hand, had a long-standing acceptance of the reality of spirits and spirit communication, but contended that messages from the dead were malign manifestations of diabolical force and therefore insisted there be no intercourse with them (pp. 11–12).

14 See especially Byrne, “‘Angels Seen Today,’” pp. 360–370, but also John B. Buescher, *The Other Side of Salvation: Spiritualism and the Nineteenth-Century Religious Experience* (Boston: Skinner House Books 2004); Ann Taves, *Fits, Trances & Visions: Experiencing Religion and Explaining Experience from Wesley to James* (Princeton: Princeton University Press 1999).

15 Buescher, *The Other Side of Salvation*; Taves, *Fits, Trances & Visions*; R. Laurence Moore, *In Search of White Crows: Spiritualism, Parapsychology, and American Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977).

for the appointment of a scientific committee to investigate spirit communication.<sup>16</sup> Though the petition failed, popular belief in the scientific promise of spiritualism did not abate. This was a time of social and intellectual turmoil, when old beliefs and practices were being challenged and new orthodoxies had not yet emerged. As a result, spiritualism and medicine had more in common than one might assume, for, along with people desiring to be released from the emotional anguish of bereavement, spiritualism drew those searching for relief of physical suffering. The popularity of “medical mediums” made spiritualism a source of destabilization not only in traditional religion, but also in medicine in the mid-nineteenth century, as competing theories on the nature of illness and the body pitted “regular” or “orthodox” physicians against “irregular” or “sectarian” practitioners.<sup>17</sup>

Not surprisingly, given its perceived progressive nature, spiritualism also had great appeal for middle-class women as an opportunity for radical gender reform.<sup>18</sup> Thanks to the rich feminist research into the nineteenth-century women’s rights movement, we are now more aware of the welter of overlapping causes and movements that existed at mid-century promising radical change for women: suffrage, abolition, temperance, universalism, female ordination, women’s dress, diet, and hosts of other therapeutic health cures.<sup>19</sup> These were issues congenial to Susan Kilborn, innovative designer of her family’s grand new Victorian frame home “The Kilbourne” in the 1850s and remembered by contemporaries

16 Bennett, *Transatlantic Spiritualism*, p. 7.

17 Where the irregulars, whose systems ranged from homeopathy, botanical cures, and patent medicines to clairvoyance and healing trances, saw nature as an ally in the healing process, regular physicians, not unlike their orthodox theological colleagues, approached nature as presenting problems to be cured or controlled. See the chapter “Mediums versus Medical Men” in Ann Braude, *Radical Spirits: Spiritualism and Women’s Rights in Nineteenth Century America*, 2nd ed. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001), pp. 142–162. An example of the hostility of the London medical profession is the account “Science and Séance” in Judith R. Walkowitz, *City of Dreadful Delight: Narratives of Sexual Danger in Late Victorian London* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press 1992), pp. 171–189. For the conflict between the proponents of “regular” and “irregular” medicine, see John Harley Warner, “Orthodoxy and Otherness: Homeopathy and Regular Medicine” in Robert Jütte, Guenter B. Risse, and John Woodward, eds., *Historical Perspectives in Culture, Knowledge, and Healing: Historical Perspectives of Homeopathic Medicine in Europe and North America* (Sheffield: European Association for the History of Medicine and Health 1998), pp. 5–30.

18 Braude, *Radical Spirits*; Alex Owen, *The Darkened Room: Women, Power and Spiritualism in Late Nineteenth Century England* (London: Virago Press, 1989); Mary Farrell Bednarowski, *The Religious Imagination of American Women* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999).

19 Nancy Cott ed., *No Small Courage: A History of Women in the United States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), pp. 179–352. For a summary of the research as it relates to women and religion, see Harry S. Stout and D. G. Hart, eds., *New Directions in American Religious History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), chap. 11, 14, 15.

as having been “years ahead of her time.”<sup>20</sup> The granddaughter of one of Stanstead Plain’s founding members and daughter of Colonel Alexander Kilborn, a well-to-do Wesleyan Methodist landowner, she had received a modest inheritance upon the death of her mother in 1853; though not claimed until 1862, it promised some independence.<sup>21</sup> This, along with her father’s prompt remarriage to a woman eleven years her junior, left her free to pursue what appears to have been a longstanding interest in medical training.<sup>22</sup> In Canada, unlike in such American centres as Boston, New York, and Philadelphia, her gender barred her from being accepted at a medical school, and so she entered a four-year apprenticeship with Moses Colby, one of Stanstead’s two practising physicians. At the time this was not an unusual path for a woman seeking medical education. In the United States, Elizabeth Blackwell, the first woman to graduate with an MD, had followed a similar route of reading medicine privately before finally in 1847, after many unsuccessful applications, being admitted to Geneva Medical College in Geneva, New York.<sup>23</sup> Unlike Blackwell, however, Kilborn left behind no documentation of why she was drawn to the study of medicine. Friends would later comment on her intelligence and wide range of interests, and her few saved letters as a practising physician reveal a woman of lively wit, inquisitive mind, and a strong sense of responsibility towards her patients. A favourite with the Colby family, she shared their respect for the aging doctor and fully entered into his reverence for medicine as a means to probe more deeply the mystery of human existence.<sup>24</sup>

20 FC, CWC Papers, Series 1:C, Box 11:4, Charles William Colby, “Garrulities of an Octogenarian” (typescript).

21 Her grandfather, Lieut. Col. Charles Kilborn, settled in 1804 in Rock Island, where he built a grist mill, a sawmill, a carding and clothiers factory, and a linseed-oil mill. He died in 1834. Her father, Lieut. Col. Alexander Kilborn (1791–1872), in 1818 built a house at the south end of Stanstead Plain, into which he moved with his parents, who remained there until the time of their death. He afterwards built a new house (the “Kilbourne”) at an expense of more than \$30,000, which in 1862 was sold and conveyed to his son Charles Alexander, who in 1863 sold out to Carlos Pierce. B. F. Hubbard, *Forests and Clearings: The History of Stanstead County* (Montreal: Lovell, 1874), pp. 155, 28, 33. Her father was remarried on November 22, 1858, to Catherine Clark, age 26 (age calculated from the 1861 census for Stanstead Township and Stanstead Plain). For her mother’s death and father’s remarriage, see *Vital Statistics* [taken from the *Stanstead Journal*] 1845–1860. Although her father was still alive, Susan Kilborn makes no reference to him in the papers that form the basis of this study.

22 A granddaughter of Moses Colby recalled Susan Kilborn wanting to study medicine with Dr. Richmond, with a vague recollection about her studies being suddenly stopped when a servant came upon a skeleton used for anatomy. Martha Stoddard Cooke, *Above the Post Office: Memories, Sketches and Stories* (Vancouver, 1953), p. 17.

23 Elizabeth Blackwell, *Pioneer Work in Opening the Medical Profession to Women: Autobiographical Sketches* (London: Longmans, Green, and Co. 1895), p. 45.

24 Her warm relationship with the Colby family receives mention in FC, Hattie Child Colby Papers, Series 2, Box 1, Diary, December 10, 14, and 16, 1859.

Educated in medicine at Yale (1819), Dartmouth (1821), and Harvard (1828), Moses French Colby had moved his practice from Derby, Vermont, across the border to the village of Stanstead Plain, Quebec, in 1832.<sup>25</sup> Although he remained there until his death and established a number of partnerships with local colleagues, he continued to keep abreast of medical research south of the border, contributing from time to time his own findings to such eminent publications as *The Boston Medical and Surgical Journal*.<sup>26</sup> The 1830s to 1860s were decades of much turbulence within the medical profession in North America as physicians found themselves embattled in an explosion of alternative or “irregular” forms of treatment such as homeopathy, hypnosis, electromagnetism, and eclecticism.<sup>27</sup> Using “orthodox” medical practices like cupping, bleeding, and application of mustard and blister plasters, Moses Colby remained squarely within the tradition in which he had been trained 40 years earlier. The future of medicine, in his view, lay in continued slow, steady “scientific” and “progressive” research and implementation, and for this reason he supported the creation of regulatory bodies like the American Medical Association and the College of Physicians and Surgeons in Canada East in 1847. He did, however, express some concern about this shift to professionalism, and in his later years as a rural physician felt increasingly alienated from members of his profession who, by using what he called “technical jargon,” kept their patients in a state of medical ignorance. He also took strong exception to the requirement of the new College of Physicians and Surgeons in Canada East that all medical students attend one of the province’s two medical schools and pass an examination. For Colby, this undermined the practical and personal element of training, leaving the medical student with much rote information but little experience or understanding.<sup>28</sup> To implement his views and to deal with the growing demands of his own practice and still offer his patients the highest level of care, he began to take apprentices. Kilborn would be the last of these.

The precise timing of Kilborn’s apprenticeship in 1857, late in Colby’s career and at a time when medical training was in a state of flux, would

25 I am indebted for the information in this paragraph to Véronyke Fontaine, “Moses French Colby et la critique médicale dans le comté de Stanstead pendant le deuxième tiers du XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle” (MA thesis, Université de Sherbrooke, 2000).

26 Copies of his published articles can be found in FC, MFC Papers, Series 3 Box 2.

27 James C. Whorton, *Nature Cures: The History of Alternative Medicine in America* (New York: Oxford University Press 2002), pp. 4–13; Norman Gevitz, ed., *Unorthodox Medicine in America* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press 1988). The Canadian scene has received less attention. See especially J. T. H. Connor, “Homeopathy in Victorian Canada and its Twentieth-Century Resurgence: Professional, Cultural and Therapeutic Perspectives” in Jütte, Risse, and Woodward, eds., *Culture, Knowledge, and Healing*, pp. 111–138.

28 Fontaine, “Moses French Colby et la critique médicale,” p. 71ff.



have a profound impact in shaping her practice of medicine.<sup>29</sup> She came to Colby when, forced by a debilitating illness to leave his regular practice, he had turned to putting into lectures the ideas, beliefs, and practices that had guided his long medical career. Frequently dictating to Kilborn and to his wife, sometimes in the form of lectures, he was especially concerned to communicate to the public the research to which he had devoted most of his final years of practice.<sup>30</sup> Based on his treatment of insanity, he had come to the conclusion, corroborated by a number of autopsies, that the link between mind and body lay precisely in the large intestine and its intricate nerve connections to the brain. Re-examining case after case in his written notes, he was convinced that malfunction of the digestive system was a major cause of nervous diseases and insanity. To fail to diagnose this and to prescribe harsh cathartic medications instead of diet and carefully regulated treatment could lead to a patient's death. While he was careful to distinguish himself from the medical profession's main rivals, the homeopaths, his interest in disorders of the digestive system and hence in diet did make room for some of their alternative treatments. In concert with the homeopaths, he believed that far too many doctors over-medicated out of greed, laziness, or ignorance. He hoped that his research on the physiology and pathology of the digestive system would conclusively challenge this practice.

Like many intellectuals in his day, he saw no contradiction between science, which he considered part of natural religion, and revealed religion. Whereas the laws of revelation provided insight into a human person's moral faculties, the role of the physician was to investigate the laws of physical existence, and so he freely interspersed his medical research writings with spiritual and biblical concepts. As a careful student of the Bible, and especially interested in the Old Testament writings, he took the Mosaic dietary laws to be an expression of the Creator's "perfect knowledge of man, his physical organization & his responsibilities."<sup>31</sup> While he did not advocate a return to the letter of those laws, they were, in his view, clear evidence of people's moral responsibility to adopt sober

29 For a synopsis of the evolution of medical training in Quebec in the period, see Jacques Bernier, *La médecine au Québec : naissance et évolution d'une profession* (Quebec: Presses de l'Université Laval, 1989). For a synopsis of the practice of medicine by Colby's generation, see especially pp. 129–143.

30 Lecture notes and summaries of his research can be found in FC, MFC Papers, Series 3, Box 3 and 4. See especially Box 3:1. See also his correspondence with his friend and former colleague, Dr. Augustus Gould, eminent Boston physician and natural scientist (MFC Papers, Series 3, Box 3:3 and Box 4:2). For a concise summary of the research and an expression of his anxiety to have it taught in medical schools, see MFC Papers, Series 3, Box 4:2, Moses Colby to the Editor of the *Montreal Gazette* [n.d.]. A brief summary of Gould's career is Jeffires Wyman, *Biographical Memoir of Augustus Addison Gould, 1805–1866: Read Before the Natural Academy of Sciences, April 22, 1903* (accessed May 23, 2008 from [books.nap.edu/html/biomems/agould.pdf](http://books.nap.edu/html/biomems/agould.pdf)).

31 FC, MFC Papers, Series 3, Box 3:1.

dietary habits. Far too much rich food was being consumed in his day, and this excess was at least as destructive to mind and body as the use of strong drink (temperance being one of his other reform interests).<sup>32</sup>

Because Colby placed his scientific research within natural religion, he underscored that in no way did its conclusions suggest a materialistic view of human life. Since in his view every human individual had been created with a body, mind, and spirit, his findings into the relationship between mental and digestive disorders would, in fact, restore the harmony of life God had intended. This harmony extended to life beyond the grave, and, in keeping with the orthodox Christian view, he believed that "Death is a temporary severance of this unity and the resurrection a reunion."<sup>33</sup> On occasion, he might go a little further to speculate on how the afterlife might be experienced. "When the darkened windows [the physical senses] are broken the soul perceives through other mediums and becomes susceptible of assimilation to the object of its desire whether good or evil," he mused in one of his lectures, "Natural and Revealed Religion," dictated in part to Kilborn.<sup>34</sup>

Such musings did not lead Moses Colby to spiritualist practices; on the contrary, he noted in one of his lectures, "We mistake a kind of Spiritualism for true religion, and an unhealthy appetite for real hunger."<sup>35</sup> Raised in the Congregationalist tradition of his Puritan forbears, and a serious Christian with a deep awe for the work of the Creator, he had little use for the religious enthusiasm accompanying the revivals that swept Vermont and the Stanstead region in the first half of the century. Against those who considered feelings and bodily manifestations the true mark of religious conversion, he was certain that "God treats his creatures as reasonable beings." Accordingly, in diagnosing and successfully treating mental as well as physical disorder, the work of a physician benefited religion as well as science.<sup>36</sup>

Low on practical experience but high on moral and scientific ideals, Kilborn's medical education under Colby was characterized by oft-repeated principles and by his growing obsession to place his findings as

32 For Colby's support of the temperance movement, see J. I. Little, "A Moral Engine of such Incalculable Power": The Temperance Movement in the Eastern Townships, 1830–52," *Journal of Eastern Townships Studies*, vol. 1, no. 1 (Fall 1997), pp. 3–39.

33 M. F. Colby, *An Abstract of the Physiological and Pathological Views, as set forth in a work entitled "New Views of the Functions of the Digestive Tube," &c (Now Preparing for the Press* (Stanstead: L. R. Robnson, 1860), pp. [5], 31.

34 FC, MFC Papers, Series 3, Box 3:3, "Natural and revealed religion," p. 24.

35 FC, MFC Papers, Series 3, Box 3:3, Lecture, p. 34.

36 For a discussion of Colby's religious views and their influence on his medical practice, see Marguerite Van Die, *Religion, Family, and Community in Victorian Canada: The Colbys of Carrollcroft* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2005), chap. 1. See also his own description of his religious struggles and the revelatory role of dreams in FC, MFC Papers, Series 3, Box 4:2.

quickly as possible before the public. Unfortunately, the final work (which ended up filling almost 800 hand-written pages) did not receive the acclaim the two had expected; publishers expressed concern about its formidable length, while his medical acquaintances responded with kindly scepticism.<sup>37</sup> Kilborn, on the other hand, remained unwavering in her support. During a trip to Britain with her family in 1859, she lugged along Colby's manuscript in an unsuccessful attempt to arouse interest among a number of eminent physicians and possible financial backers.<sup>38</sup>

Undeterred, she continued to believe ardently in his findings, and in 1860 she assumed responsibility for publishing a prospectus as a possible way to gain the attention of medical colleagues for the unpublished manuscript. Entitled *Abstract of the New Physiological and Pathological Views, as set forth in a new work entitled "New Views of the Functions of the Digestive Tube, &c."* (Now Preparing for the Press), this short treatise, to Colby's great dismay, turned out to be riddled with errata that had escaped his well-intentioned editor. To his further distress, the publication aroused no interest when Kilborn, at his request, showed it to a few well-known Boston physicians following her move in 1862 to seek further medical training.<sup>39</sup> Shortly before his death in May 1863, with unwavering determination, Colby entrusted her with the daunting task of updating and preparing his hefty manuscript for publication.<sup>40</sup> This did not happen.

Though the manuscript remained in her possession until her own death in 1868, Kilborn's time and attention were taken up by the demands of establishing a practice and making a living. From the sparse documentation of her life during these years, it is impossible to ascertain to what extent she was able to receive additional training after the termination of her apprenticeship with Colby. Having remained in contact with a number of well-placed medical colleagues in Boston since his studies at

37 In his lectures and in his published abstract outlining his research, Colby frequently acknowledged the authority of a number of eighteenth-century physiologists, most notably Erasmus Darwin and F. J. V. Broussais of Paris. The latter was also greatly interested in the large intestine and, like Colby after him, resisted the growing tendency among clinical doctors to separate mind and body and reduce all of life to physics and chemistry (J. Duffin to the author, e-mail message March 10, 2007). For the history of this contested transition, see Jacalyn Duffin, *To See with a Better Eye: A Life of R. T. H. Laennec* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1998), pp. 226–239. Augustus Gould expressed his scepticism about Broussais as an authority and about the research more generally (FC, MFC Papers, Series 3, Box 4:2, A. A. Gould to Moses Colby, November 21, 1855 and April 13, 1857).

38 Mention of the trip is found in FC, HCC Papers, Series 1, Box 3:6, Harriet Child Colby to her mother, September 15, [1859], and Series 2, Box 1, Diary, December 10, 14, and 16, 1859. For a regretful letter of refusal from a British contact and an abridged copy by Susan Kilborn, see FC, MFC Papers, Series 1, Box 1:13, Shirley V. Woolman to Moses Colby, November 9, 1860.

39 FC, MFC Papers, Series 3, Box 4:2, Moses French Colby to "Dear Doctor" [probably Winslow Lewis], n.d. [1862].

40 FC, MFC Papers, Series 3, Box 4:2, Moses French Colby to Susan Kilborn n.d. [1862].

Harvard, Colby had written a letter of introduction requesting hospital privileges for her at the Massachusetts City Hospital.<sup>41</sup> In Boston, she may also have contacted Oliver Wendell Holmes, professor of anatomy and physiology in the Medical School of Harvard University, whom Colby had earlier unsuccessfully tried to interest in his manuscript. Though Holmes was known to support the admission of women to lectures at the Harvard Medical School, strong faculty and student resistance prevented women from enrolling until the mid-twentieth century.<sup>42</sup> Given this resistance, she would not have received visiting privileges at the Massachusetts City Hospital. The only alternative in Boston, therefore, was the New England Female Medical College, which started as a school for midwives in 1848 and two years later expanded to offer women a full medical curriculum and a medical degree. Its extensive advertising and homeopathic approach would not have escaped Kilborn's notice. Like many at the time, she may have enrolled in some classes, but there is no evidence that she graduated from this institution.<sup>43</sup>

This did not prevent her from adopting the designation MD at a time when the regulation of medical qualifications in the United States was still in flux.<sup>44</sup> Posters and a railway subscription indicate that in 1866 she was travelling and lecturing in Boston, Rhode Island, Washington, and New York City. Advertising herself as a physician from Canada East,

41 FC, MFC Papers, Series 3, Box 4:2, Moses French Colby to "Dear Doctor" [probably Winslow Lewis], n.d. [1862]. Lewis and Augustus Gould (see note 22) were consulting physicians at the hospital. See FC, MFC Papers, Series 3, Box 1:3, Winslow Lewis to Moses Colby, February 14, 1860. For a brief biography of Dr. Winslow Lewis (1799–1875), see <http://www.bpl.org/general/trustees/lewis.htm> (accessed May 24, 2008).

42 Holmes's unsuccessful efforts as Dean to advocate the admission of Harriot Hunt to Harvard Medical School in 1846 and 1850 are described in Harriot K. Hunt, *Glances and Glimpses* (Boston: John P. Jewett, 1856), pp. 215–219, 265–272.

43 Founded by Dr. Samuel Gregory, an eccentric and controversial publicist of what he saw to be women's superior aptitude for the medical profession, the New England Female Medical College advertised its sessions and its graduation exercises in a wide range of newspapers, including some in Vermont, which bordered Stanstead. Classes ran for 17 weeks, with a requirement of three years' attendance, along with a preceptorship under physician supervision in the last two years of training. See William Harvey King, *History of Homeopathy and its Institutions in America*, chap. 5, "Boston University School of Medicine," <http://www.homeoint.org/history/king/3-05.htm> (accessed February 11, 2007). Kilborn is not listed as a graduate of the New England Female Medical College (pp. 75–79). This is confirmed by Susan Boone, reference archivist, to the author, e-mail message February 12, 2007. Boston was Kilborn's place of residence by the summer of 1862 (see note 56).

44 In Canada, there had been none of the wholesale licensing repeal that took place in the United States during the 1830s and 1840s (and thus would have precluded Kilborn from adopting the title MD in her native country). J. T. H. Connor, "A Sort of *felo-de-se'*: Eclecticism, Related Medical Sects, and their Decline in Victorian Ontario," *Bulletin of the History of Medicine*, vol. 65 (1991), pp. 503–527, reprinted in J. K. Crellin *et al.*, eds., *Alternative Health Care in Canada: Nineteenth and Twentieth-Century Perspectives* (Toronto: Canadian Scholar's Press 1997), pp. 59–83 (see p.76 for the comparison of licensing practices).

she drew attention to her expertise in “varieties mental derangement” such as “neuralgia and loss of memory” and “disturbances of the digestive organs and kidneys.” She continued therefore to be influenced by Colby and, like him, was insistent that medical knowledge should not be hoarded by professionals but be disseminated to give people greater control over their bodies and lives. Her advertisements concluded with the offer, “If desired, a Course of Lectures will be given to Ladies upon these subjects, their Causes and means of Cure.”<sup>45</sup> Commendations in her circulars reveal that she was able to arouse the support of an impressive group of reform-minded women, including Mrs. Horace Mann, Sarah M. Severance, Massachusetts’s superintendent of the temperance union, and Paulina Wright Davis, the prominent women’s rights campaigner.<sup>46</sup>

The combination of her credentials and contacts landed her an appointment as professor of physiology at the New York College for Women, which had opened its doors in 1863. Although we know she was not among the College’s initial faculty, loss of the institution’s early records make it impossible to ascertain the date of her appointment. Thanks to a surviving programme, however, we do know that she had the honour of speaking on behalf of the faculty at its fourth annual commencement on March 1, 1867.<sup>47</sup> A homeopathic medical school for women, founded by Clemence Lozier, an active figure in New York reform circles, the College boasted an entirely female board of trustees.<sup>48</sup> Many of these, most notably Elizabeth Cady Stanton, were known for their interest in radical moral and religious reform. Sharing the podium with Kilborn

45 Circulars, advertisements, lecture tickets, and a November-December 1866 complimentary railway pass on the Boston & Worcester Railway are in WHS, DF Papers, Susan Kilborn File, 78A–81, 89–92.

46 WHS, DF Papers, Susan Kilborn File, 79, 80, “Circular . . . Newport (R.I.) Daily News, Aug. 18, 1866” and “The Attention of the Ladies of Boston,” circular [1866].

47 WHS, DF Papers, Susan Kilborn File, 2AB. The loss of the early records was confirmed by Shawn Manning, Coordinator, Education Services, New York Medical College, Health Sciences Library, e-mail message to author, January 24, 2007. The most complete information on the College appears to be James J. Walsh, *History of Medicine in New York: Three Centuries of Medical Progress* (New York: National Americana Society, 1919), vol. 2, chap. 7. Kilborn’s name is not among his list of the College’s faculty at its opening in 1863 (p. 554), and she does not appear subsequently. However, his list of new faculty for 1867–1868 includes appointments who are already listed as faculty on the Commencement Programme for March 1867, where Kilborn’s name appears as Professor of Physiology and speaker. Among the new appointments for 1867–1868, Walsh does not mention physiology, but cites Mrs. Dr. Charlotte A. Lozier (daughter-in-law of Dr. Clemence Lozier and a graduate of her institution) as “assistant to the chair of Physiology and Hygiene” (p. 557).

48 For the context of the founding of the New York Medical College and the challenges faced by women physicians, see Regina Markell-Sanchez, *Sympathy and Science: Women Physicians in American Medicine* (New York: Oxford University Press 1985). The institution is not to be confused with the Women’s Medical College of the New York Infirmary, founded in 1857 by Elizabeth Emily Blackwell, who had a strong dislike of sectarian women practitioners like Lozier (p. 73).

that day was a contingent of male speakers equally associated with advanced causes, such as Unitarian minister O. B. Frothingham and Horace Greeley, editor of the *New York Tribune*. Among the students in the graduating class of 1867 was Emily Stowe, who, after being refused admission to every medical school in her native Canada, had been among the first to enrol at the New York College for Women.<sup>49</sup> Stowe's interest in spiritualism and medical healing, shared by other American women physicians of the time, most notably Harriot Hunt and Emily Blackwell, and later by her own daughter, Augusta Stowe-Gullen, is yet another indication of the eclectic spiritual and scientific milieu in which Kilborn found herself during the years she lectured and sought to establish a medical practice.<sup>50</sup>

Within this configuration of radicals was a remarkable family with whom Kilborn forged close ties: Elizabeth Foote Denton, her husband William, and William's sister and brother-in-law, Annie and Alfred Cridge. The Cridges were strong proponents of "modern Spiritualism," to which they had turned after the death of an infant son, and they vigorously propagated its beliefs and practices through print and platform, including in the Maritime provinces of British North America.<sup>51</sup> The Dentons held equally radical and unconventional views, including support for anti-slavery, women's dress reform, evolution, and a critique of traditional Christianity, which in 1854 led William to write, as the first of many pamphlets, "Common Sense Thoughts on the Bible."<sup>52</sup>

49 Jennings, Emily Howard (Stowe), *Dictionary of Canadian Biography* <http://www.biographi.ca/EN/ShowBioPrintable> (accessed January 16, 2007); Mary Beacock Fryer, *Emily Stowe: Doctor and Suffragist* (Toronto: Hannah Institute & Dundurn Press 1990), pp. 43–48.

50 Hunt, *Glances and Glimpses*, pp. 196–206, 356–357. For Blackwell's more ambivalent view, see her description of attending a seance in Paris in 1849 (*Pioneer Work*, pp. 150–153). The importance of radical women's networks for female physicians at this time is discussed by Mary Roth Walsh, "Feminist Showplace" in Judith Walzer Leavitt, ed., *Women and Health in America: Historical Readings* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1984), pp. 509–525. A brief reference to Stowe-Gullen's practice of spiritualism, based on a family communication, is in Hacker, *Indomitable Lady Doctors*, p. 34. The need for a study on Stowe's place within nineteenth-century spiritualist and healing movements is noted in Patricia Jasen, "Mind, Medicine, and the Christian Science Controversy in Canada, 1888–1910," *Journal of Canadian Studies*, vol. 32, no. 4 (Winter 1997/1998), p. 4 (<http://www.proquest.umi.com.proxy.queensu.ca/pqdweb?index>, accessed June 14, 2009).

51 Alfred Cridge, *Epitome of spirit-intercourse ... manifestations in Nova Scotia; important communications from the spirits of Sir John Franklin and the Rev. Wm. Wishart, St. John, N.B.* (Boston: M. Marsh, 1854) [Canadian Institute for Historical Microreproductions, no. 18873]. Kilborn invites Mrs. Cridge for a visit in a letter to Mrs. Denton (WHS, Susan Kilborn File, 93, n.d.).

52 William Denton, *Common sense thoughts on the Bible for common sense people* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Library, 2005, reprint of 4th edition, 1871). For the first edition in 1854 and Denton's other writings, listed by title and date only, see "Publications by William Denton" in [Laurel Nilson], *The Dentons of Wellesley* (Wellesley Historical Society, [1998]), [pp. 13–14].

Working with a small group of like-minded enthusiasts who included his brother-in-law Alfred Cridge, William developed the science of “psychometry,” which held that material objects such as stones and fossils could hold memories of all they had witnessed and that such memories could be read by a spiritual medium. Especially gifted to do this, he believed, were his sister Annie and his wife Elizabeth, even though the latter favoured psychology rather than spiritualism as explanation for paranormal phenomena. The couple filled notebooks with accounts of past civilizations divined from their growing collection of geological specimens, and in 1863 co-authored two works on psychometry, *Nature’s Secrets* and the first volume of *The Souls of Things*.<sup>53</sup>

That same year they took to the road with a lecture series that resulted in a ten-day, highly acclaimed visit in February to Stanstead and nearby Derby Line, Vermont.<sup>54</sup> The event took place only a few months before Moses Colby’s death when he was already very ill, but Denton found an opportunity to discuss with him one of his most celebrated cases, that of Mrs. Abigail Cass. Cass, a clairvoyant, had undergone careful observation in the early 1830s by Colby, who had widely disseminated his findings (which included the loss of her clairvoyancy following his treatment, and her death shortly thereafter).<sup>55</sup>

It is unclear whether Kilborn’s friendship dated from the visit to Stanstead, but by 1865 both the Dentons and Kilborn had settled in Wellesley, conveniently located near Boston, where Kilborn briefly established an office.<sup>56</sup> The two women regularly exchanged visits and shared interests, even mooting the possibility of combining their knowledge of medicine and psychology in a shared practice. From time to time, Kilborn consulted her friend on difficult cases, and on occasion would

53 Widowed after a brief marriage, Denton met and married another kindred radical spirit, Elizabeth Foote, a woman as unconventional in her decision to wear bloomers as in her profession as a typesetter and writer for a small radical journal in Cincinnati. The couple’s various endeavours and publications are recorded in Nilsen, *The Dentons of Wellesley*.

54 HCC Papers, Series 1, Box 1:1, Hattie Child Colby to Charles Carroll Colby, January 29, 1863; *Stanstead Journal*, February 3, 1863.

55 Hubbard, *Forests and Clearings*, pp. 345–347, gives a summary of the account published in the 1835 *Boston Medical and Surgical Journal* by Colby and his partner S. Barnard. The case was repeated in “The Strange Case of Mrs. Cass,” *The Gazette*, February 23, 1880. Denton refers to his discussion with Colby in William Denton, *Is Spiritualism True?* (Boston: William Denton, 1871), p. 10. He notes that his own and his family’s involvement with spiritualism dated from the mid-1860s and that table-rapping was a frequent household pastime (p. 40).

56 The office was located at 18 Edinboro Street, Boston, where she would meet patients and friends daily after 12 p.m. Prior to this, she had used a hotel (WHS, DF Papers, Susan Kilborn File, 99AB, Susan Kilborn to Elizabeth Foote Denton, n.d. [1866?]). A search of the Boston City Directories 1862–1868 under Physicians did not reveal any listing for her. Nor does she appear among the many “Other Physicians” who range from “clairvoyants” and “electro.” to MD.

direct to her clients who were interested in psychometry.<sup>57</sup> Letters to “My dear Mrs. Denton” were filled with banter and commentary on such intimate matters as Elizabeth’s (apparently unwanted) pregnancy and their mutual dislike of those who equated church attendance with godliness.<sup>58</sup>

Recurring themes were Kilborn’s ill health and financial worries. The latter had become exceptionally acute by the summer of 1867. In 1858 she and her only brother, Charles Alexander, had each been awarded a \$5,000 inheritance from their mother. However, by the time of her removal to Boston in 1862, her younger brother, who had been one of Stanstead’s wealthiest businessmen but appeared to have fallen on hard times, still had not paid out her share, and she was forced to resort to legal action against her only sibling.<sup>59</sup> The five annual contributions of \$1,000 and interest she had accordingly been awarded came to an end in the summer of 1866, and subsequent efforts to earn a living through lecturing and consultation yielded meagre results. “I don’t like it at all that my pockets are so empty. I am obliged to spend so much valuable time trying to contrive some way to get something out of somebody to help me live,”

57 WHS, DF Papers, Susan Kilborn File, 99AB, Susan Kilborn to Elizabeth Foote Denton, n.d. [1866?]. See also two letters, Susan Kilborn File, 97AB and 98, Susan Kilborn to Elizabeth Foote Denton, January 29, [1866?], and n.d.

58 For the latter, see WHS, DF Papers, Susan Kilborn File, 96AB, Susan Kilborn to Elizabeth Foote Denton, July 14, [1867].

59 For the inheritance and a mortgage for \$6,000 offered by their father, presumably to provide liquid funds, see Stanstead County Land Register B, vol. 8, C. A. Richardson #125 and #127, November 15, 1858. Kilborn’s appeal for the \$5,000 owing and her brother’s promise to pay in five equal instalments is found in Stanstead County Land Register B, vol. 10, C. A. Richardson, #210, February 1, 1862. At some unspecified date thereafter, Kilborn moved to Boston. See Stanstead County Land Register B, vol. 10, C. A. Richardson, #377, June 28, 1862, recording partial discharge of the 1858 mortgage (#125). Susan Kilborn, residing in Boston, was represented by Ozro Morrill, her brother’s former business partner. According to Jean-Pierre Kesteman, her brother Charles Alexander was one of the wealthiest landowners in the St. Francis District in 1861, with a fixed capital of \$17,839 and 250 cleared acres. Jean-Pierre Kesteman, “Une bourgeoisie et son espace : industrialisation et développement du capitalisme dans le District de Saint-François (Québec), 1823–1879” (PhD dissertation, Université du Québec à Montréal, 1985). However, in April 1861, he and his partner Ozro Morrill sold their entire business stock to local resident Albert Knight (*Stanstead Journal*, April 24, 1861), and in May 1863 he sold the majority of his land to Carlos Pierce of Boston, who subsequently moved to Stanstead (Stanstead County Land Register B, vol. 11, C. A. Richardson, #108, May 23, 1863). At that time the 1858 mortgage was fully cleared (C. A. Richardson, #109, May 26, 1863). Hubbard notes that, in 1863, Carlos Pierce “bought the Kilborn farm and other pieces of land, amounting in all to 600 acres, which, with the buildings and improvements he made, involved an expense of \$150,000” (*Forests and Clearings*, pp. 129–130). C. A. Kilborn’s death date is incorrectly given as 1864 in Jean-Pierre Kesteman, Peter Southam, and Diane Saint-Pierre, *Histoire des Cantons de l’Est* (Sainte-Foy: Presses de l’Université Laval, 1998), p. 290. Sometime after 1863 he moved to Natick, Massachusetts, where he is listed in the 1870 census (p. 123) as a grain and flour dealer with real estate valued at \$2,000. See also note 94.



she grumbled to Denton. "I hardly know what is before me, at present the way seems to be blocked up."<sup>60</sup>

There was one unexpected opening: suddenly that same week, a family friend, Dr. Jedediah Baxter, Chief Medical Officer of the Provost Marshal General's Bureau in Washington, stopped by to procure a copy of Moses Colby's 1860 abstract with a view of conferring about possible publication of the manuscript with his colleague, Professor William Hammond of New York University and Bellevue Hospital.<sup>61</sup> Baxter and Hammond, who at different times each served as Surgeon General of the Army, had become increasingly interested in physiological and psychological research through their service during the Civil War and were at this moment laying the foundations of distinguished careers in research and publication.<sup>62</sup> In an environment where wartime deaths had renewed the practice of spiritualism, both would also publish work decrying experiences such as that on which Susan Kilborn was to embark only two weeks after Baxter's visit.

At that time, Kilborn accepted a longstanding invitation to give a Sunday lecture at the little white clapboard church in the Christian socialist community of Hopedale. Though she had never been there, friends assured her she would find an appreciative audience.<sup>63</sup> Having long since left behind her own Wesleyan Methodist roots, she was drawn to the ideals of the community.<sup>64</sup> Located near Milford, not far from her home in Wellesley, Hopedale was well known for its support of radical causes including abolition, pacifism, women's political rights, female dress reform, temperance, and, above all, spiritualism. Established in 1842, by the time of Kilborn's visit the community was beginning to enter a period of decline, despite the valiant efforts of its founder, Adin Ballou, to continue to propagate the radical implications of his Practical

60 WHS, DF Papers, Susan Kilborn File, 96AB, Susan Kilborn to Elizabeth Foote Denton, July 14, [1867].

61 *Ibid.*

62 For Baxter, see "XVI. Brigadier General Jedediah Hyde Baxter, Surgeon General of the United States Army, 1890," *Journal of the Association of Military Surgeons*, vol. 16 (1905), pp. 59–63. Hammond's work and influence are discussed in Bonnie E. Blustein, *Preserve Your Love for Science: Life of William Hammond, American Neurologist* (New York: Cambridge University Press 1991).

63 WHS, DF Papers, Susan Kilborn File, Manuscript, p. 1.

64 The 1861 census for Stanstead Township and Stanstead Plain gives her religion, and that of her brother, father, and stepmother, as Wesleyan Methodist. Records for the Wesleyan Methodist Church, Stanstead, indicate that her father was a pew-holder, but no Kilborns appear in the church's class lists of members. It can therefore be assumed that, like many, her family were adherents rather than church members. She indicates her disdain of conventional Sabbath behaviour in WHS, DF Papers, Susan Kilborn File, 96AB, Susan Kilborn to Elizabeth Foote Denton, July 14, [1867].

Christianity.<sup>65</sup> Among its inhabitants were Kilborn's hosts for the weekend, George and Elma Comstock, and their two young daughters. Mrs. Comstock, with whom Kilborn felt an instant affinity, had for a long time suffered from an unnamed illness, become depressed, and given up all hope of recovery. Supported by her husband, she requested to go to Kilborn for treatment, and less than two weeks later, on August 12, arrived in Wellesley for an initial two-month stay.<sup>66</sup>

As was not uncommon at the time, especially among female practitioners of the new "irregular" cures for women like homeopathy and hydropathy, much of Kilborn's treatment concentrated on "talking therapy" and diet, the latter reflecting her earlier work with Colby. Rather than using traditional, more harsh approaches such as blisters, cupping, and surgery, women physicians generally tended to favour conservative systemic therapies such as diet, medication, and talking. As Susan Wells has underscored when describing the ways nineteenth-century women physicians shaped their profession:

The medical practice that the first women physicians entered was one which valued talk. The body's story was not read from diagnostic images or test results but composed from information provided by the patient and confirmed, if need be, in direct examination by the physician. Medicine was, therefore a heavily discursive practice, worked out patient by patient in a series of conversations.<sup>67</sup>

Often described as the telling and hearing of "a heart history," conversations between female doctor and patient called for a strong measure of empathy to be efficacious.<sup>68</sup> That Mrs. Comstock fully received this from Kilborn is evident from her description of her new patient's entry into treatment:

Mrs. Comstock came, desperate from long continued suffering, and anxiously grasping at anything that offered a prospect of relief. — I opened my house and my heart to the sufferer, prescribed for her, and nursed her myself, and in a few days I was happy to find I had so far succeeded in my efforts that she was able to take short drives.<sup>69</sup>

65 Edward K. Spann, *Hopedale: From Commune to Company Town, 1840–1920* (Madison: University of Ohio Press, 1992), pp. 153–164. See also the detailed description of the community in 1854 in Cridge, *Epitome of Spirit Intercourse*, p. 96.

66 WHS, DF Papers, Susan Kilborn File, Manuscript, pp. 2–5.

67 Susan Wells, *Out of the Dead House: Nineteenth-century Women Physicians and the Writing of Medicine* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2001), p. 16.

68 *Ibid.*, p. 29.

69 WHS, DF Papers, Susan Kilborn File, Manuscript, p. 6.

As a change for her patient, she suggested a visit to a spiritualist medium, Mrs. Child, who lived about three miles away in Natick, whom she had met a few years earlier and for whom she and her friends the Dentons had great respect.<sup>70</sup> Lydia Maria Child, well-known novelist, abolitionist, and advocate for Native Americans, took spiritualism very seriously. Along with other intellectuals, including the writer and reformer Thomas Wentworth Higginson, she was careful to distinguish her own beliefs from those of the large numbers of Spiritualists who gathered to take part in sensational demonstrations.<sup>71</sup> Her fear of the effects of the popularization of spiritualism did not, however, pre-empt a judicious recourse to it as a source of healing, a fact that became evident during Kilborn's and Elma Comstock's visit. When, in the course of their conversation, Mrs. Comstock mentioned that she too had once been a medium, Child, in a trance, counselled that healing would only take place if Comstock were to cease resistance and "yield to the Spirits" several hours each day. The two women returned to Wellesley, and, after some deliberation, Mrs. Comstock agreed. Mrs. Child was summoned, and under spirit influence conducted a solemn ceremony of consecration in which Mrs. Comstock was promised eventual healing and a future, yet undefined, mission of great consequence.<sup>72</sup>

After two months of steady recovery under Kilborn's medical care and a daily private time dedicated to spiritualism, Mrs. Comstock found the "mental and spiritual" to have become "more harmonious," and she was able to go home for a month. Returning to Kilborn early in December, she brought along written evidence that during her stay at home she had received impressions with detailed directions about her medical treatment, diet, and exercise. In Kilborn's estimation, these were remarkably skilful and wise; when, upon Comstock's return, the focus of the communications shifted to Kilborn's own deteriorating mental and physical state, Kilborn began to apprehend that the guiding spirit was none other than

70 Lydia Maria Child was the sister-in-law of Stanstead businessman and politician Marcus Child; possibly this connection may account for their acquaintance (J. I. Little to author, e-mail message, June 13, 2008). Kilborn describes her in her manuscript (p. 7) as "an earnest woman, who had proved the truth of her convictions, that she had been chosen and set apart, to be used as an instrument for doing good; leading a pure and blameless life, giving her time, without money and without price, to all who called on her."

71 It was her fear, as she noted with concern in 1862, that Spiritualism "is undermining the authority of the Bible in the minds of what are called the common people faster than all other causes put together" (Braude, *Radical Spirits*, pp. 28, 48).

72 WHS, DF Papers, Susan Kilborn Files, Manuscript, pp. 8, 9. A note by Mrs. Comstock dated December 2 (WHS, DF Papers, Susan Kilborn File, 68A) records a request that Mrs. Child again be summoned. Unless otherwise indicated, all writings by Mrs. Comstock are in trance, conveying messages to Kilborn from Moses Colby.

her beloved Dr. Colby.<sup>73</sup> The context is important. By her own admission, Kilborn had been in poor health for some time and was also at the time overwhelmed by a complicated and difficult medical case she was nursing in her home. Now convinced that the spirit of the learned and much loved Colby was watching over her, she began to follow its guidance in her practice. Under the instructions of the medium, Kilborn found herself with great success executing procedures quite unusual to her former practice: applying a blister to Mrs. Comstock and cupping her (but only once),<sup>74</sup> as well as receiving detailed instructions on the treatment of the other four women patients under her care, including the difficult case that had been causing her such anxiety.<sup>75</sup> The entire care of this patient was taken off Kilborn's hands; through the medium, prescriptions, diet, and other treatment were conveyed with "the greatest wisdom, to meet the exigencies the case demanded."<sup>76</sup> Drawing on the language of scientific experimentation to describe what was happening, Kilborn observed in her narrative that these interventions had suddenly permitted her to make up a major deficiency in her medical knowledge that had long troubled her.<sup>77</sup>

Strange as this collaboration between a spiritualist medium and the spirit of an eminent physician may appear today, the practice was sufficiently common in the nineteenth century to arouse the ire of critics who, aside from seeing evidence of fraud, also accused mediums of lining their pockets as they extracted fees commensurate with the fame of the deceased.<sup>78</sup> For the two women in this narrative, the rewards were decidedly more complex and ambiguous. Where contact with the spiritual world provided Kilborn with new confidence as a medical practitioner, Mrs. Comstock's own notes detailing the communications also reveal a strengthened sense of agency. As studies show, this was a common

73 WHS, DF Papers, Susan Kilborn File, Manuscript, pp. 10–13. Recognizing Colby by his earnest and familiar words, Kilborn noted, "it will not be wondered at, that my eyes should fill, and that tears of joyful recognition coursed down my cheeks" (p. 13).

74 WHS, DF Papers, Susan Kilborn File, Manuscript, pp 11–14; Susan Kilborn File, 69C, communication written by Comstock, December 5, 1867.

75 WHS, DF Papers, Susan Kilborn File, Manuscript, p. 17; Susan Kilborn File, 40AB, 41, 42AB, 44A, 47AB, 48, 50, 53, 56, communications by Mrs. Comstock on treatment of Mary Norton (including a letter to her father to treat her kindly) and of Miss Lee, Miss Robinson, and Miss Battell. A note, possibly to Elizabeth Denton, in Kilborn's handwriting on the treatment of Miss Lee shows significantly more medical knowledge (Susan Kilborn File, 87A).

76 WHS, DF Papers, Susan Kilborn File, Manuscript, p. 17; Susan Kilborn File, 37A rt, It, communications by Mrs. Comstock.

77 While Kilborn had seen this as a deficiency, bloodletting and purgative medical drugs were seen by sectarians as the distinctive emblems of regular practice; they targeted a traditional physician who used such methods as a "calomel doctor." John Harley Warner, "Medical Sectarianism, Therapeutic Conflict, and the Shaping of Orthodox Professional Identity in Antebellum American Medicine" in W. F. Bynum and Roy Porter, eds., *Medical Fringe and Medical Orthodoxy, 1750–1850* (London: Croom Helm 1985), p. 238.

78 Walsh, *History of Medicine in New York*, vol. 2, p. 303.

occurrence among female mediums and a major source of their participation in radical reform movements.<sup>79</sup> In the vacuum left by Kilborn's illness, Comstock's role in the practice grew in authority and scope: taking notes when another physician was consulted, communicating with the relatives of patients, and deferring requests from potential patients until such time as Kilborn was again well. Given the centrality of dietary treatment, many of the messages allegedly coming from Colby consisted of what Comstock, the ailing Kilborn, and her patients might or might not eat. Lime water, both as a drink and for hot baths, figured prominently, as did mutton, beef steak and chops, cream and cream cakes, and (on days when the digestive system needed a rest) milk, oatmeal, dry bread, and tea.<sup>80</sup> A decision by one of the two servant girls in Kilborn's employ to reduce by two-thirds the amount of cream in the cakes met with a sharp rebuke to Kilborn to maintain control of her household.<sup>81</sup> Nor was she to have Mrs. Comstock do any housework, and there was to be no tampering with instructions.<sup>82</sup>

The intent of all of this was to provide rest and renewal for Kilborn so that the two women would be able to undertake the momentous purpose of their original encounter. That purpose was soon revealed to be none other than the preparation for publication of Colby's long-neglected manuscript. Both women were instructed to prepare themselves, Kilborn through rest and recovery and Comstock by returning home to her family in Hopedale.<sup>83</sup>

In the course of her month's stay in Hopedale, in an environment where social reform and spiritualism were assumed to be natural partners, Mrs. Comstock experienced an expansion both of her sense of mission and the authority of her controlling spirits. Moses Colby, it became evident, was but one of a select band of progressive spirits including Unitarian ministers William Channing and Theodore Parker, all intent on furthering the welfare of humanity by offering commentary on causes favoured by the Hopedale community.<sup>84</sup> The source of the dominant impressions,

79 Braude, *Radical Spirits*, especially pp. 82–116; Bednarowski, *Religious Imagination*, pp. 50–52; Buescher, *The Other Side of Salvation*, pp. 150–161.

80 WHS, DF Papers, Susan Kilborn File, 24AB, 31, 34AB, 33, 36AB, 37AB, 69ABC, communications by Mrs. Comstock.

81 WHS, DF Papers, Susan Kilborn File, 34, communication by Mrs. Comstock, Tuesday evening December 14, but in Kilborn's writing (presumably to be inserted later into her narrative).

82 WHS, DF Papers, Susan Kilborn File, 10A, Communication by Mrs. Comstock.

83 WHS, DF Papers, Susan Kilborn File, Manuscript, pp. 19–20.

84 Others were spirits of an unnamed Indian chief; an Englishman who in the other world had come to revise his earlier antipathy toward American republicanism; an Italian patriot; and a grandfatherly, long-departed European, also unnamed (but with some resemblance to the seventeenth-century scientist and spiritualist Emanuel Swedenborg). Special causes receiving attention, with speeches (all copied by Kilborn into her account), were uses of the Sabbath, spousal equality, maternal love, and the dangers of the emotionally immature taking on parenthood (WHS, DF Papers, Susan Kilborn File, Manuscript, pp. 23–28, 32–33, 40–46).

however, continued to be ascribed to Colby, who for several weeks during the illness of Mrs. Comstock's two young daughters assumed to her complete satisfaction the responsibility of their medical treatment.<sup>85</sup> Further messages expanded their mother's new role, advising her that in six months' time the field of spiritualist influence would be enlarged with a series of lecturing engagements.<sup>86</sup> Since Mrs. Comstock would now be spending almost all her time away from her husband, a reassuring letter from the spirit world, dictated specifically to Mr. Comstock and appealing to his varied interests, underscored the importance of Colby's manuscript to advancing the cause of science, humanity, and spiritualism.<sup>87</sup>

Upon returning from Hopedale in mid-January, strongly confirmed in her gifts and sense of mission, Mrs. Comstock commenced with great vigour the revisions of the manuscript guided by impressions from Colby. These emphasized the need for the utmost secrecy, for it appeared that, in Comstock's absence, Kilborn had shared some of her notes with others. The presence of servants and occasional visitors for Kilborn led to another peeved message, allegedly from Colby, that traffic through the room in which Mrs. Comstock was working must be immediately eliminated.<sup>88</sup> Instructions were given to Kilborn to go to Boston to consult with "the chief physicians of the City Hospital" on current authoritative titles on physiology with a view to updating quotations as needed. This was done; a young physician "fresh from the schools" was consulted when the chief physicians turned out to be too busy. Once assured that Colby's prime source, W. B. Carpenter's *Manual of Physiology* (Kilborn's own apprenticeship textbook), was still authoritative, Kilborn purchased the latest edition before returning to Wellesley.<sup>89</sup>

In short order, a routine was put in place whereby Mrs. Comstock would read the manuscript aloud carefully, begin copying it, and whenever she experienced a sense of uncertainty would pause and wait for an impression

85 WHS, DF Papers, Susan Kilborn File, Manuscript, pp. 39–40; Susan Kilborn File 73ABCD, communications by Mrs. Comstock, January 5, 1867. Theodore Parker was not a Spiritualist, though his Unitarian congregation included at least one practising medium, and his critique of traditional Christianity and support for reform causes made him popular among Spiritualists (Braude, *Radical Spirits*, pp. 49, 75). Unitarian minister William Ellery Channing debated Spiritualism with Hopedale's founder, Adin Ballou, but after Channing's death his spirit apparently became a popular messenger among trance mediums (Buescher, *The Other Side of Salvation*, pp. 135, 195).

86 There are a number of rambling lecture fragments by Comstock on Colby's research, using Kilborn's voice and acknowledging "Dr. Colby of Canada with whom I studied and who deceased some six years since" (WHS, DF Papers, Susan Kilborn File, 11AB, 38ABCD).

87 WHS, DF Papers, Susan Kilborn File, Manuscript, pp. 37–39.

88 WHS, DF Papers, Susan Kilborn File, 43, communication by Mrs. Comstock, Wellesley, January 16, 1868.

89 WHS, DF Papers, Susan Kilborn File, 35A, communication by Mrs. Comstock and notes by Kilborn, January 27, [1868], pp. 15, 16.

or an “illumination” for changes, which would then be written on a note for Kilborn. It was Kilborn’s task each evening to examine the notes, compare the copied work with the original manuscript, and ensure that no errors had crept in.<sup>90</sup> For someone whose medical training had in large part come through dictation, this mode of work had a certain familiarity, even though the source of her information was now communicated through a medium. Of a different nature, but also assumed without question, was an additional scientific task. Early in their collaboration it was communicated that Kilborn should write a second manuscript in which she would detail the mode and manner of her encounter with the medium, along with all that followed.<sup>91</sup> Since its intent was to offer insight into the still largely unknown laws that governed spiritualism, Kilborn followed a familiar pattern of scientific research, paying close attention to detail, probing Mrs. Comstock with questions to ascertain her mode of receiving communication, and carefully writing down her observations. When, for example, at certain times the medium seemed physically unable to respond, a note was made that “it would appear as though some influence was at work, which caused great distress in the region of the epigastrium & the top & front of the head.”<sup>92</sup> These notes were saved for later inclusion in the narrative but remained unincorporated, for the account was abruptly terminated at Mrs. Comstock’s return in mid-January when all available time was redirected to Colby’s manuscript.

This close collaboration did have material consequences. As Comstock was now offering her time and labour, Kilborn felt responsible for her room and board as well as her travelling expenses since each weekend she returned to her family in Hopedale. Her own practice had stopped so that she could devote herself fully to the manuscript revisions, making her entirely dependent on her brother, who was now living in nearby Natick with his wife and two infant children and apparently contributing financially to the maintenance of her household.<sup>93</sup> Within a week of these new arrangements, when Kilborn’s financial anxieties threatened to bring the project to a halt, the medium received a solicitous communication that, given the importance of the enterprise to the cause of science and of spiritualism, “perhaps it would be better to try the faith of the spiritualists by trying their pockets.”<sup>94</sup> After some resistance and

90 WHS, DF Papers, Susan Kilborn File, notes by Kilborn, January 27, [1868], pp. 15–20, 29–30.

91 WHS, DF Papers, Susan Kilborn File, Manuscript, December 9, p. 21.

92 WHS, DF Papers, Susan Kilborn File, 13, note by Kilborn.

93 WHS, DF Papers, Susan Kilborn File, 18, 19, note by Kilborn.

94 *Ibid.* The July 19, 1870 census for Natick, Massachusetts, p. 123, lists Charles A. Kilborn, age 57; Abba O., age 36; Jennie E., age 3; Charles S., age 2. Birthplace of his wife and son is given as Ohio and that of his daughter as Massachusetts. Kilborn’s occupation was given as flour and grain dealer, his real estate was valued at \$2,000, and the household listed two servants. He died at

after receiving permission to show a select number of people the narrative describing her collaboration with the medium, Kilborn was persuaded to send out letters requesting financial support.<sup>95</sup> There is evidence that some success followed: a \$50 donation from one of Kilborn's friends to help cover the "great sacrifices of time, labor & money, both on your part, & that of the medium & her family" and a strong letter of reference underscoring the "unblemished moral integrity and character" of William and Elma Comstock, signed by Adin Ballou and E. D. Draper, founders of the Hopedale community, were forthcoming.<sup>96</sup>

Such support testified to the unquestioned link between science and spiritualism within her circle of acquaintances, but did not entirely eradicate her gnawing concern about evidence and credibility. "Who will believe our report?" Kilborn jotted down one evening when, worn with anxiety, she was vainly trying to concentrate on reading her recently purchased copy of Carpenter. The answer, as ever, was to place the project's unusual collaboration within a familiar framework, the dissemination of important scientific research: "Here," she observed, "was a fact too stupendous to be taken in, we two women temporarily isolated from this world holding full and free converse with the inhabitants of the other world, one of them dictating revision of a scientific work from which he had been called before he had time to do it here."<sup>97</sup>

A further opportunity to test their work's credibility came a few days later, when Mrs. Comstock conveyed as "coming from the Dr. a most interesting & instructive discourse upon Electricity." Though Comstock expressed surprise that she was able to communicate such difficult and profound concepts, Kilborn assured her that the topic was familiar and one she herself had been waiting until the proper time to raise. An authority on electricity happened to be her good friend, Elizabeth Foote Denton, who promptly stopped by for a visit after tea.<sup>98</sup>

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age 61 in 1880, in Needham (after 1881 Wellesley), and his occupation was given as merchant (Registry, year ending May 31, 1880, for Needham, County of Norfolk, Massachusetts, p. 31, <http://content.ancestry.com/Browse>, accessed May 7, 2007).

95 Permission from the spirit world to show the narrative also to her brother to convince him of the systematic and "business-like" manner of the project was deferred until the work was more advanced (WHS, DF Papers, Susan Kilborn File, 20).

96 WHS, DF Papers, Susan Kilborn File, 85, A. S. White to Susan Kilborn, February 8, 1867; Susan Kilborn File, 86, Adin Ballou and E. D. Draper "to Whom it May Concern," dated Hopedale, Mass., February 10, 1868. This is the only reference I have been able to locate that confirms the presence of the Comstocks at Hopedale. Neither appears among the hundreds of practising spiritualists of the 1850s and 1860s (<http://www.spirithistory.com/listings.html>, accessed May 7, 2007).

97 WHS, DF Papers, Susan Kilborn File, 19, note by Kilborn.

98 WHS, DF Papers, Susan Kilborn File, 25, note by Kilborn. Denton had had previous contact with Mrs. Comstock, having been invited to meet her shortly after her arrival (WHS, DF Papers, Susan Kilborn File, 125, Susan Kilborn to Elizabeth Foote Denton, n.d.). Kilborn recorded



Electricity, mesmerism, and clairvoyance, no less than spiritualism, were subjects of considerable scientific interest in the mid-nineteenth century.<sup>99</sup> Unlike her husband William, Elizabeth Denton did not believe in communication with the spirit world, but rather based on her reading and practice of psychology, located the seat of spiritual activity within the subconscious. In the past, she and Kilborn had engaged in some personal experimentation with electricity as a means to treat Kilborn's "congestion of the liver," and her visit offered a welcome opportunity to resume research.<sup>100</sup> In Kilborn's words, "The manifestations with which I had become acquainted under my own roof were to me so convincing that I felt a natural desire that my friend should be convinced also." It quickly became evident that the "separate magnetisms" emanating from Comstock were so strong that Denton could not control her hands when she tried to place them on the medium. To Kilborn, the image presented by the two women, Comstock seated and Denton behind her, one hand on the head of the medium and the other stretched upward, had profound religious significance, "a fit representation of a mortal trying to grasp the immortal." Recalling some of Denton's theories as a psychologist, she concluded she now had a better understanding of the nature of spirit communication: "If there is an influence entirely of Earth, Electricity-Gravitation-Magnetism, call it what you please, Attraction why should not the soul which is sent out continually in that direction lose its spiritual nature and become material? *Like produces like.*"<sup>101</sup>

Whereas "electricity" helped Denton and Kilborn in their consideration of spiritualism as a scientific enterprise, the term most frequently used by Mrs. Comstock as medium was "power." The force of that power continued to expand. A spiritual message dictated the following day clarified that the purpose of the Colby-Kilborn re-encounter now also included future assistance in research on electricity, magnetism, and clairvoyance, areas in which "great discoveries are about to be made and communicated between the two worlds."<sup>102</sup>

These grandiose prospects seem, however, to have foundered shortly thereafter. There is a hint of a rift between the two women, as Mrs. Comstock, always acting in her assumed role as a medium for Colby, expressed increasing frustration at Kilborn's apparent unwillingness to

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Denton's comments on Mrs. Comstock's experience of electricity (WHS, DF Papers, Susan Kilborn File, 13).

99 Braude, *Radical Spirits*, pp. 4–24; Gillian Gill, *Mary Baker Eddy* (Reading, MA: Perseus Books, 1998); Ernst Bentz, *The Theology of Electricity*, trans. W. Taraba (Allison Park, PA: Pickwick, 1989).

100 The experiment is described at length by Kilborn (WHS, DF Papers, Susan Kilborn File, 88AB).

101 WHS, DF Papers, Susan Kilborn File, 25–28, notes by Kilborn, January 30.

102 WHS, DF Papers, Susan Kilborn File, 46AB, communication by Mrs. Comstock, Wellesley, February 11, 1868.

follow orders and attend to her declining health.<sup>103</sup> By the second week in March, there are no more writings of spirit communications by Mrs. Comstock.<sup>104</sup> There is, however, an advertisement of a free public lecture at the Columbian College, Washington, on May 3 by Susanna L. Kilburn [*sic*], MD. Its title, “The Nervous System in Man; the connection, direct and sympathetic, between the mind and body; Paralysis; Mental Derangement, &c.,” indicates that she had resumed the task of publicizing the research of the late Moses Colby.<sup>105</sup> At some point thereafter, her health took a turn for the worse, and she died on November 21, 1868.

Deeply mourning her death, Kilborn’s two closest friends, Elizabeth Denton and Ellen Baxter, mother of Jedediah and financial patron of Colby’s 1860 prospectus, took on the task of distributing her belongings and ensuring her remains were sent by train to Stanstead for burial beside her mother.<sup>106</sup> There is no mention in their correspondence of Mrs. Elma Comstock, but a chagrined comment about Charles Alexander’s failure to accompany his sister’s body to the Boston railway depot for its final journey suggests that, in her final illness, Susan Kilborn had received little sympathy or support from her brother.<sup>107</sup>

The few papers that she left behind were preserved by Denton, while Colby’s manuscript, presumably in its original form, was sent to Dr. Jedediah Baxter at his specific request, conveyed by Ellen Baxter.<sup>108</sup> There its trail ends, for, although Colby’s prospectus did find its way

103 WHS, DF Papers, Susan Kilborn File, 72AB, communication by Mrs. Comstock, March 1, 1868.

104 Communication between the two worlds took on a new intensity the first week in March upon the sudden death of Senator Portous [*sic*] Baxter, a long-time friend of Moses Colby and father of Dr. Jedediah Baxter. A flurry of communications followed, with Baxter, through the help of his deceased friend Colby, offering reassuring information to his grieving family about his transition to the spirit world, as well as a pointed lecture on “modern Spiritualism” to Baxter’s son. His widow Ellen was one of Kilborn’s closest friends and had generously funded the publication of Moses Colby’s 1860 prospectus, but nothing is known of Kilborn’s reaction to this latest encounter with the spirit world. The Baxter communications are the last writings by Mrs. Comstock in the Kilborn papers (WHS, DF Papers, Susan Kilborn File, 8AB, 9AB, 59AB, communications by Mrs. Comstock, March 9, [1868]). Baxter died March 4, 1868; in his early years he had lived and had a business in Derby Line, Vermont, and there had met Moses Colby. He served for three terms, 1861–1867, in the United States Senate (“Baxter, Portus [1806–1868],” *Biographical Directory of the United States Congress, 1774–Present*, <http://bioguide.congress.gov/scripts/biodisplay.pl?index> (accessed January 16, 2007).

105 WHS, DF Papers, Susan Kilborn File, 89. A handwritten advertisement for April 30 is found in Susan Kilborn File, 83. An incomplete letter by Mrs. Comstock, postponing the visit because of Kilborn’s health and offering the inquiring patient medical advice, is in WHS, DF Papers, Susan Kilborn File, 54AB, n.d.

106 WHS, DF Papers, Susan Kilborn File, Ellen Baxter to Elizabeth Foote Denton, December 3, 1868.

107 *Ibid.* The remains apparently were misplaced for awhile at the railway depot, an occurrence that, in Mrs. Baxter’s opinion, would have been avoided had Kilborn’s brother accompanied them.

108 WHS, DF Papers, Susan Kilborn File, 4B, Ellen Baxter to Elizabeth Foote Denton, November 27, 1867.

into the Library of the Surgeon General (given Baxter's promotion in 1890), there is no evidence that he ever made use of Colby's research or returned the manuscript to his family.<sup>109</sup> Nor do the contents of the manuscript appear to have convinced his colleague William Alexander Hammond. Hammond's *Treatise on the Diseases of the Nervous System*, published to high international acclaim in 1871 as "the first text-book of nervous diseases in the English language" and extensively revised in many subsequent editions, made no reference to Moses Colby's by then outdated theories. Happily, the strange manner of the revision of Colby's manuscript did not make it into Hammond's other major publication, *Spiritualism and Allied Causes and Conditions of Nervous Derangement*. Forcefully concluding that all phenomena associated with spiritualism were "readily explainable by well-known physiological, pathological, or physical laws," Hammond had little use for pious expressions like "Outpouring of the Spirit of God," a term that, in his view, ignorant folk used to describe such illnesses as "epilepsy, chorea, catalepsy, ecstasy, hysteria or insanity."<sup>110</sup> Hammond's dismissal of spiritualism as a cause of insanity, along with his work on diseases of the nervous system, was part of what historian Peter Lamont has called an "increasing discourse of factuality" in the 1870s. As scientists made the public increasingly aware of the vulnerability of the senses, the evidence of credible witnesses who had experienced paranormal phenomena such as spiritualism was no longer considered authoritative. Participants in that discourse included not only Hammond and Baxter in the United States and in Britain W. B. Carpenter (author of Kilborn's physiology text), but also orthodox clergy, all of whom pronounced as purely subjective what an earlier generation had hailed as the interpenetration of material and

109 I thank Jacalyn Duffin, Hannah Chair, History of Medicine, Queen's University, for bringing to my attention the listing of Colby's prospectus in the Index of the Library of the Surgeon General (now National Library of Medicine in Bethesda). The missing manuscript, shorn of its spiritualist history, did weave itself into the Colby family narrative. Commenting on her grandfather's medical career in her memoirs published in 1953, Colby's granddaughter Martha Stoddard Cooke noted that in her possession was a letter to Colby from "Jedediah Baxter, Surgeon General of the United States, asking for treatises of his, then acknowledging their receipt, enclosing a list and promising safe return. . . . They never were returned and were very valuable" (Cooke, *Above the Post Office*, p. 17). Her recollection is faulty in its details since Baxter did not reach this rank until almost 30 years after Colby's death in 1863, when his career was only beginning. He received the degree of BS in 1859, followed by the MD in 1860, and in 1863, after serving briefly as a surgeon in the Northern army during the Civil War, was assigned to duty in the newly organized Provost Marshal General's Bureau as chief medical officer. He died less than a year after being promoted to Surgeon General ("Obituary," *British Medical Journal*, January 3, 1891).

110 William A. Alexander, *Spiritualism and Allied Causes and Conditions of Nervous Derangement* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1876), p. vi. See also his strong anti-feminism in Blustein, *Preserve Your Love*, pp. 190–196, as well as his dismissal of Spiritualism (along with religion in general) (pp. 196–200).

spiritual worlds.<sup>111</sup> Ironically, even those medical practitioners deemed unorthodox or sectarian followed a similar course. As one historical study of homeopathy in the United States has pointed out, in their own search for professionalism, most homeopaths had by the 1880s “stripped their system of its spiritualist, holistic, feminist and populist roots.”<sup>112</sup>

Only recently, with the rise of alternative or complementary medicine world-wide, has historical interest turned to exploring the nineteenth-century popularity in Canada and the United States of therapeutic practices deemed holistic or integrative such as homeopathy, hydropathy, and Thomsonianism.<sup>113</sup> Notwithstanding Moses Colby’s objections to the approach of these practitioners, his medical research, with all its eccentricities, shared their conviction that sickness, disease, and healing needed to be framed in ways that maintained the unity between body and spirit that so-called regular or scientific medicine appeared to be abandoning. His eclectic approach to illness, refashioned in gendered ways by his student Susan Kilborn, therefore connects to the still largely uncovered history of nineteenth-century alternative medicine, whose practitioners transgressed boundaries between religion, feminism, populism, and medical science at a time when these were becoming more sharply defined and differentiated.<sup>114</sup>

This permeability of boundaries also has methodological implications for religious history, for it recalls the ways people once saw the secular as interrelated with the sacred. “Of all aspects of religion, the one that has been clearly the most out of place in the modernizing world — the one that has proven least tolerable to modern sciences — has been the

111 Lamont, “Spiritualism and a Mid-Victorian Crisis of Evidence,” pp. 915–920.

112 Naomi Rogers, “American Homeopathy Confronts Scientific Medicine,” in Jütte, Risse, and Woodward, eds., *Culture, Knowledge, and Healing*, p. 50. One of the few efforts to integrate the story of religious faith and healing into medical history remains that of James Walsh, eminent historian of medicine in New York State, who in 1919 would devote an entire chapter in his multi-volume work to the impact of spiritualism upon the medical profession in the nineteenth century, whose practitioners had been at the vanguard of exposing its alleged cures (Walsh, *History of Medicine in New York*, vol. 2, pp. 393–410). Mormonism and “Eddyism” (Christian Science) are briefly mentioned as other forms of spiritualism.

113 I am grateful here again to Jacalyn Duffin in helping me locate the sparse Canadian research in this area, most notably J. K. Crellin, R. R. Anderson, and J. T. H. Connor, eds. and comp., *Alternative Health Care in Canada: Nineteenth- and Twentieth-Century Perspectives* (Toronto: Canadian Scholar’s Press, 1997); Jennifer J. Connor, “Thomsonian Medical Books and the Culture of Dissent in Upper Canada,” *Canadian Bulletin of Medical History*, vol. 12 (1995), pp. 289–311. Thomsonian practitioners followed the early-nineteenth-century medical practice of New Englander Samuel Thomson, who, believing that all illnesses derived from the body’s loss of life-giving heat, relied principally on botanical cures.

114 American women constituted approximately two-thirds of the patrons and patients of homeopathy and were among its most active propagandists. Josef M. Schmidt, “Homeopathy in the American West: Its German Connections” in Guenter G. Risse, Ronald Numbers, and Judith Walzer Leavitt, eds., *Medicine Without Doctors* (New York: Science History Publications, 1977), p. 58.

radical presence of the gods to practitioners. The modern world has assiduously and systematically disciplined the senses not to experience sacred presence; the imaginations of moderns are trained toward sacred absence,” observes Robert Orsi.<sup>115</sup> The people described here were still trained towards sacred presence, not as mediated by church officials, but in a variety of new and exciting ways: through ancient rocks, electricity, mesmerism, clairvoyance, and spiritualism. Whereas historians once interpreted such encounters with the sacred as a brief marginal footnote in the history of Protestantism, we are now able to place them in a much wider context. Leigh Eric Schmidt’s research into the early 1800s, for example, has underscored that, even in the visual literary culture of the post-Enlightenment, the study of sound, including hearing voices from the spirit world, continued to be seen as scientific pursuit.<sup>116</sup> In our own day, the fascination of mainstream culture with “New Thought” in the form of such once-derided practices as channelling, therapeutic touch, mental healing, and a wide assortment of meditation techniques is wreaking havoc to long-held positivist assumptions and reorienting the study of religion. Indeed, as Schmidt has pointed out in a subsequent study of the nineteenth-century origins of contemporary spirituality, the latter’s florid and unorthodox expressions can be traced to the same enterprising spirit that guided the optimistic Victorian world of science. Noting “the interwoven history of liberalism, progressivism, and spirituality in American culture,” he offers compelling evidence that “the invention of ‘spirituality’” was in large measure a search by nineteenth-century Americans “for a religious world larger than the British Protestant inheritance.”<sup>117</sup>

With only a few exceptions, historians of religion in Canada, including myself, have tended to overlook or misread this Protestant Victorian world of scientific optimism, longing, and hope.<sup>118</sup> For some, such as Ramsay Cook, the interest in spiritualism in the late Victorian period has been yet another indication of a secularizing Canadian society in which Protestant Christianity was becoming increasingly irrelevant.<sup>119</sup> While others have challenged this reading and pointed to the vitality and influence of mainstream Protestant denominations in Canadian public life at the turn of the century, they have presented religion

115 Orsi, *Between Heaven and Earth*, p. 12.

116 Leigh Eric Schmidt, *Hearing Things: Religion, Illusion, and the American Enlightenment* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000).

117 Leigh Eric Schmidt, *Restless Souls: The Making of American Spirituality* (New York: Harper San Francisco, 2005), pp. 19, 5.

118 One study that does examine the topic admirably for a later period is Pamela E. Klassen, “Radio Mind: Protestant Experimentalists on the Frontiers of Healing,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, vol. 75, no. 3 (September 2007), pp. 651–683. See also notes 122 and 123 below.

119 Ramsay Cook, *The Regenerators: Social Criticism in Late-Victorian English Canada* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1985), especially pp. 3–25, 65–85.

mainly in terms of institutionally defined belief and practice — in churches, schools and universities, voluntary societies, or the home.<sup>120</sup>

In such an approach, the significance of the sacred has been largely confined to a brief period of intense revivalism in the first few decades in the nineteenth century. Thereafter, sacred absence rather than presence has marked the reading of Protestant religion in the Victorian period and beyond. Tamed of any experiential outpouring, Protestant denominations have been presented as bastions of moral order and middle-class respectability.<sup>121</sup> Assuming religion to be reasonable and accessible to intellectual analysis, we have situated it within the process of modernization: as a structure in nineteenth-century gender, community, and national identity formation; as scaffolding for intellectual debates informed by common-sense realism, philosophical idealism, Darwinian evolution, and liberalism; as moral motivation for social and political reform.<sup>122</sup> Important and much-needed publications have resulted. Yet, in ignoring or minimizing sacred presence, we have also overlooked the ways people have drawn on it to fashion religious beliefs and practices that offered alternative understandings of self and society.<sup>123</sup>

Locating his work within the methodology of lived religion, James Opp, in his innovative, multilayered analysis of Protestant faith healings in Canada in the years 1880 to 1930, has recently demonstrated how these ostensibly marginal cultural practices can be seen as important sites of bodily knowledge when framed within a cosmological context that

120 An informed recent analysis of the debate on secularization among Canadian historians can be found in Richard Allen, *The View from Murney Tower: Salem Bland, the Late Victorian Controversies, and the Search for a New Christianity* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2008), pp. xv–xxvii.

121 William Westfall, *Two Worlds: The Protestant Culture of Nineteenth-Century Ontario* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1985); Van Die, *Religion, Family and Community in Victorian Canada*. A negative view of the move from experiential to orderly religion, focusing on Nova Scotia and New Brunswick, is George A. Rawlyk, *Ravished by the Spirit: Religious Revivals, Baptists, and Henry Alline* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1984).

122 For a representative example of each approach, see Lynne Marks, *Revivals and Roller Rinks: Religion, Leisure and Identity in Late-Nineteenth-Century Small Town Ontario* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1996); A. B. McKillop, *A Disciplined Intelligence: Critical Inquiry and Thought in the Victorian Era* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1979); Nancy Christie and Michael Gauvreau, *A Full-Orbed Christianity: The Protestant Churches and Social Welfare in Canada, 1900–1945* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1996).

123 Here the ethnographic approach taken by historians to the encounter between Native peoples and Protestant missionaries is a corrective. See, for example, Susan Neylan, *The Heavens Are Changing: Nineteenth-Century Protestant Missions and Tsimshian Christianity* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2003).

integrates faith, sickness, and health.<sup>124</sup> The encounters of Moses Colby, Susan Kilborn, and a spiritualist medium, strange on the surface, need to be placed within such a context and read as an engagement with the sacred. In each case, in different ways, these individuals considered themselves participants in a scientific pursuit heralding a new and better world, ending the constrictions that kept women and men from reaching their potential: Moses Colby, passionate about the advancement of medical science; Susan Kilborn, struggling to provide relief to suffering women; and Mrs. Elma Comstock, housebound and ill, for whom spiritualism suddenly opened wider opportunities.

Hopes, dreams, disappointments, and desires are sites of the sacred in people's lives, but these lives are embodied in the material world. As historians of lived religion have emphasized, people access the sacred through their senses, through "knowledges of the body." Food and body, as demonstrated by gender historians like Carolyn Walker Bynum for the medieval period and Marie Griffiths for contemporary evangelical women, are especially important sites of religious belief and practice. One thinks of Moses Colby, guided by the principles of natural and revealed religion as he painstakingly researched his patients' nervous and digestive disorders; of an entranced Elma Comstock regulating the food supply in Kilborn's home; of Susan Kilborn treating her patients with diet and "talking therapy" to restore harmony of body, mind, and spirit; and of Elizabeth Denton experimenting with electric currents in a spiritualist medium's body, "a fit representation of a mortal trying to grasp the immortal."

Embedded within the materiality of the body, religion offers a space for people to engage imaginatively and creatively with the structures, tensions, and contradictions of this world. For women in the period under consideration, even educated women like Susan Kilborn during the 1860s, these included stifling financial dependency on male family members, frequent health breakdowns, and almost insurmountable challenges to educational and professional development. An even greater and more enduring contradiction directed both Moses Colby's and Susan Kilborn's medical practice and drove, in different ways, their frantic efforts to publish research intended to alleviate human suffering. As they knew through their medical practice and through struggles with their own chronic illnesses, life is often contradicted by sickness and disease and always, sooner or later, by death. Alongside all the other contradictions and tensions of her life, ultimately it was the contradiction of death, of an unfinished life and separation from someone loved and needed, that shaped Kilborn's encounter with spiritualism. "I can say in sincerity she was the most

124 James Opp, *The Lord for the Body: Religion, Medicine, & Protestant Faith Healing in Canada, 1880–1930* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2005).

talented woman I *ever met!* Too late, I trust she will be appreciated by those who alas! have hastened her departure — *All human hearts require human sympathy,*” her friend Ellen Baxter emphatically lamented to Elizabeth Foote Denton upon hearing of Kilborn’s death.<sup>125</sup> Her words are a reminder that the human world of belonging, longing, and contradiction, in which the line between earth and heaven becomes very thin, is also the world of religion as lived experience.

125 WHS, DF Papers, Susan Kilborn File, 4B, Ellen Baxter to Elizabeth Foote Denton, November 27, 1867.