

Contribution to The Dictionary of Nineteenth-Century Journalism

The Spiritualist Press

Periodicals played a crucial role in the spread of ‘Modern Spiritualism’ from its birth in the United States of America in the late 1840s. Entrepreneurial journalists, often supported by wealthy spiritualist converts, exploited falling costs of periodical production and the growing fascination for ‘spirit-rapping’ to launch journals promoting spiritualism as a religious, scientific, philosophical, political, and social enterprise. During spiritualism’s heyday — between 1850 and 1900 — a plethora of spiritualist journals were published (principally in the United States, Britain, France, and Germany) and these ranged from cheap weeklies for plebeian spiritualists to more expensive monthlies catering to bourgeois and aristocratic interests in the subject. Some, such as the Boston-based *Spiritual Philosopher* (founded 1850), enjoyed only brief lives, while others, such as the London-based *Light* (founded 1881), continue to this day. Distinctive aspects of these periodicals included reports of domestic seances, transcripts of ‘trance’ addresses, and reproductions of ‘spirit writing’ and ‘spirit photographs’. Spiritualist periodicals reflected the wide variety of uses to which spiritualism was put. Thus, in Britain, the *Medium and Daybreak* (1869–1895) promoted spiritualism as a secular alternative to Christianity, while the *Spiritual Magazine* (1860–1875) promoted spiritualism as weapon against secularism and Christian unbelief. In contrast to both these titles, the *Spiritualist* (1869–1881) privileged the scientific above the religious aspects of spiritualism. The spiritualist journals were the places where many key Victorian figures — including the journalists Samuel Carter Hall and William Howitt and the scientists William Crookes and Alfred Russel Wallace — expressed some of their profoundest views on relationship between body and mind, and matter and spirit.

Sources

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