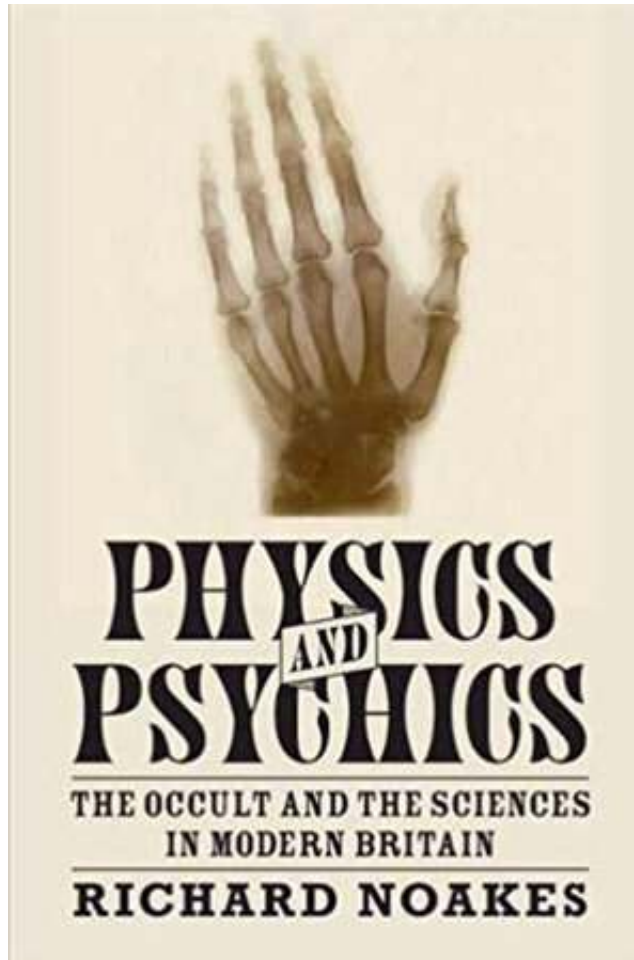


On the Permeable Place Between Science and the Supernatural

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Physics and Psychics: The Occult and the Sciences in Modern Britain

Richard Noakes

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[Other](#)

Slated for release in October 2019 as part of the *Science in History* series by Cambridge University Press, [Physics and Psychics: The Occult and the Sciences in Modern Britain](#) by [Richard Noakes](#) is the first rigorous exploration of the surprising connections between Victorian science and the phenomena commonly described as psychic, occult and paranormal. The book offers fascinating insights into the 'heretical' activities of some of the most eminent scientists in Victorian Britain, and will demonstrate just how porous the boundary between science and the seemingly supernatural was at the time – and perhaps still is.

For much of the 20th century psychic and paranormal phenomenon had been dismissed as

carnival oddities by the mainstream press. I had written an article on the CIA's decades-long remote sensing program, where they deployed psychics to ferret out cold war secrets. ("[The Stargate Project: Psychic Warriors and the CIA](#)", Reality Sandwich.) So, this book caught my eye when it popped up on the [Forbidden Histories](#) site. I reached out to Dr. Noakes and picked his brain about stuff that had always intrigued me – the cultural history of the occult, the academic interactions between modern science and the realm of the supernatural, and the surprisingly recent divergence between scientists and spiritualists.

I limited my role to asking provocative questions in order to spark a stimulating and perhaps revealing conversation. Evidently, it worked.



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How do you describe your area of research?

My research embraces the historical relationships between, on the one hand, Western sciences, and on the other, wider aspects of human culture, including religion, the occult and esotericism, technology, industry, and the mass media. I have long been interested in the fascination of Victorian scientists (and in particular, physicists) for spiritualist mediumship, telepathy, apparitions, water divining and other phenomena grouped together as 'psychical'. This fascination continued long after the Victorian period with the intriguing interest of post-Second World War physicists in the 'spooky' implications of quantum mechanics.

What would you say are the reasons for the divergence between the materialist-empiricists and the world of spirituality in our times?

If there is a divergence it's partly because people around the world have grown disenchanted with traditional religious institutions, which have for millennia been regarded as the most authoritative mediators of spirituality. But plenty of people are spiritual without being religious and seek to enrich their spiritual lives outside traditional religious faiths. And, of course, there are some who are completely materialist-empiricist in their view of the world and accordingly find no space for spirit.

But I doubt very much if even many scientists regard materialism-empiricism as something other than a useful or pragmatic way of thinking scientifically about the world. I doubt whether many of them accept that materialism-empiricism answers all questions (e.g., the origin of life, the origin of consciousness).

Your question implies the need for an answer to the question of why psychic phenomena are no longer at the cutting edge of scientific research. There are many reasons for this. Many

scientists have been trained to accept that psychic phenomena either don't exist or if they do, they're not fruitful areas of scientific enquiry.

Another reason is that many scientists feel terribly threatened by psychic phenomena. They call into question many cherished assumptions about mind, matter, space and time which many scientists are less likely to abandon than to accept evidence for paranormal effects.

How does your work deepen our understanding of the relationship between science and the occult, and science and religion? Just how important was the psychic world in the development of the physical sciences at the end of the 19th century?

My book argues that psychic phenomena interacted much more extensively and creatively with 19th century sciences than we have assumed. Many of the key developments in the physical sciences would have taken place without psychic phenomena and it's perfectly possible to write histories of Victorian physics without mentioned such phenomena. But these phenomena interested and inspired many more physicists, electrical engineers, astronomers and others than we have assumed.

My book also emphasises the ways in which theoretical and experimental contexts matter enormously to understanding the forays of physical scientists into psychical research. Given the exciting possibilities of theories about the ether and the microscopic constituents of matter, many of the startling effects seen in spiritualist seances (e.g., telekinesis and materialised spirits) became more intelligible.

The experimental aspects of the physical sciences were also freighted with 'psychical' implications. The physical sciences embraced experimental skills and hardware that enabled the detection, measurement, study and manipulation of a host of physical effects, many of which (like chemical spectra) were quite 'ghostly' in nature (because they were hard to see and transient).

But my book also makes it clear that experimental physics was often very hard to do - instruments were temperamental, effects capricious, laboratory environments unstable etc. This had two implications: it made many physicists tolerant of the far greater problems of doing psychical experiment and gave them the skills and resources to cope with experimental difficulties.

The Society of Psychical Research (SPR) had many luminaries in its ranks including the man who discovered the electron, JJ Thompson, the renowned chemist Sir William Crookes, physicist Sir Oliver Lodge, Nobel laureate Charles Richet and psychologist William James. They introduced a number of neologisms, such as 'telepathy'. What were some of the most important findings of this society? What institutions, if any, are continuing their work?

The SPR produced some of the most convincing evidence to date of the existence of what it christened 'telepathy' and this furnished the basis for many cases of thought-reading and ghost-seeing. It also produced evidence for a host of other psychic effects - including telekinesis and survival - but by the 1930s little of this proved as convincing as telepathy. Telekinesis was, like telepathy, one of many terms that it introduced into the English language.

Of course, many 20th century critics, as well as many today, maintain that the evidence for telepathy remains inconclusive at best. But perhaps the SPR's greatest achievement is in raising the intellectual profile of investigating phenomena often relegated to the realms of pseudo-science and superstition. The SPR is alive and well today and continues to support research into a host of effects that cause problems for strictly materialist views of the cosmos.

A measure of its success in raising the intellectual profile of psychical investigation is that it inspired the invention of numerous other psychical research organisations around the world, as well as institutions devoted to the sister field of parapsychology (a field whose name was deliberately designed to align the study of psychical effects with the science of psychology). Some examples: Koestler Parapsychology Unit at the University of Edinburgh, Institute of Noetic Sciences (California), Division of Perceptual Studies, at the University of Virginia School of Medicine, Australian Institute for Parapsychological Research, Centre for the Study of Anomalous Psychological Processes, University of Nottingham, Parapsychology Research Group, Liverpool Hope University.

In 1884, the SPR sent Richard Hodgson to India to investigate Helena Blavatsky of the Theosophical Society and concluded that her claims of psychic power were fraudulent. How did investigators tell apart bogus claims from the real thing?

The group of intellectuals that dominated the SPR in the late 19th century certainly accepted most of what Hodgson's notorious report claimed, but there were many SPR members who continued to belong to the Theosophical Society long after this damning verdict. There were many in the SPR who did not think Hodgson's argument was as convincing as he claimed (e.g., he had been too selective in his evidence and choice of witnesses) and in 1986 one SPR member, Vernon Harrison, published a famous critique of the Hodgson report which did not prove Blavatsky's genuineness but certainly furnished good reasons to think that she wasn't fraudulent.

Nineteenth century German chemist and industrialist Baron Von Reichenbach proposed a mysterious vital force which he named "od", for the Norse deity Odin, indicating a power, like the animal magnetism conceived by Franz A. Mesmer, which permeates the whole of nature. This is strongly reminiscent of *Prana* or *Chi* from Hindu and Taoist traditions. Have these parallels been explored?

The similarity between Reichenbach's 'od' and Prana was noted, with some satisfaction, by late 19th century modern Theosophists. In her magnum opus *The Secret Doctrine* (1888), Blavatsky wondered why the word 'od' was similar to the Tibetan word for light or radiancy. However, there have been plenty of readers of Reichenbach's work who think that od is too physical to be closely linked to prana or chi.

One of the most interesting things about Reichenbach's 'od', and for that matter Mesmer's animal magnetism, is that both fulfill similar purposes to the grand unified theories of modern physics. Reichenbach contemplated the possibility that od might be the connecting link between all known physical forces - resembling all of them to one degree or another, but not being identical to any of them.

What are you hoping to achieve with your work? Do you see more inter-subjective academic research between science and spirituality in the future?

I am hoping to persuade readers that Victorian and Edwardian scientists were far less narrow-minded and materialist and much more open-minded and creative than they might have assumed. Far too many commentators on Crookes, Lodge and others are embarrassed by these physicists' forays into spiritualism, etc., and wish that historians would skirt around the issue. But I think that such coyness about the likes of Crookes and Lodge is very poor history and greatly misunderstands the ways in which they saw physics and psychics as parallel, even convergent enterprises.

I passionately believe that telling stories about psychics as part of physics makes physics more interesting and appealing, rather than posing a threat to its image. I do indeed hope to see more exchanges between science and spirituality in coming years but it is going to be difficult, owing to the different ways in which science and spirituality are experienced.