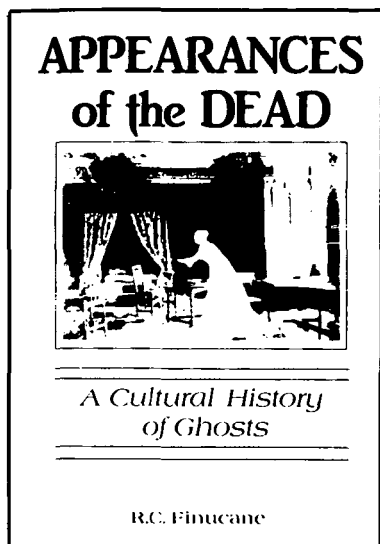


## A History of Hauntings

*Appearances of the Dead: A Cultural History of Ghosts.* By R. C. Finucane. Prometheus Books, Buffalo, N.Y. 232 pp. Cloth, \$20.95.

Erik Strommen

**G**HOSTS HAVE a compelling air of antiquity about them. Images of restless souls rising from their graves, or lingering near the places they frequented in life, suggest something timeless and eternal about the human spirit. That ghosts should stir a feeling of eternity is not surprising. As the children of imagination and the human fear of death, ghosts sit astride one of humankind's greatest anxieties. As denizens of the "other world," ghosts can therefore teach us much, not about the afterlife, but about ourselves. This is the basic theme of *Appearances of the Dead: A Cultural History of Ghosts*.



R. C. Finucane, a historian, has done a great service by conducting a long overdue intellectual history of ideas about the spirits of the dead and their haunting of the living. His thesis, articulate and well argued, is that ghosts reflect the collective cultural view of death of their times and that as our ideas of death have changed, so have our ghosts. To illustrate his point, we are given a tour that starts in ancient Greece, where dead souls were relatively harmless, and "flitted and squeaked like crazed bats all the way down to Hades," goes through the Middle Ages, where ghosts were potentially malevolent bringers of moral authority and vengeance, and ends up in the modern world, where ghosts have become little more than sporadic, idiosyncratic visitations, seemingly meaningless in their activities and appearances. Along the way, we are treat-

ed to authoritative commentary on ghosts by contemporary scholars, and we get to meet the restless dead themselves, in all their wonderful forms.

Finucane's thesis is presented on two levels, which are interwoven throughout each chapter. At the formal level, he provides us with a sample of theological and "scientific" views of the authorities of each period we visit, informing us of their assumptions and debates. At the experiential level, we are introduced to the spirits themselves, their stories recounted in the words of their percipients. I'll discuss these two levels separately, beginning with the authorities and the formal theories of ghosts that have been argued through the ages.

Through an analysis of classical works, medieval church texts, and intellectual

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treatises, Finucane shows us how ghosts entered Christianity as artifacts of paganism. Invited in by Catholicism's preoccupation with the burial sites of saints and its desire to gain converts through the accommodation of alien beliefs, ghosts presented a sticky issue for the Church. Their "existence," at first denied, was taken eventually as evidence against immediate judgment and consignment to heaven or hell upon death; ghosts in fact served as a significant factor in the formation of the doctrine of Purgatory. Although some clerics questioned their existence, ghosts were eventually welcomed into Catholic theology with open arms. Hauntings fit neatly into the Catholic cosmology, in which death and life were closely connected, and where actions taken in this world had direct implications for one's fate in the next. Finucane shows us churchmen using tales of hauntings as moral lessons; and ghosts in the Middle Ages came to be heavily imbued with symbolic meanings, often depicted as wearing clothing or bearing burdens relating to sin and its punishment.

The comfortable place of ghosts in the Christian afterlife gradually eroded, however. The Protestant Reformation created the first real problems for the wandering dead. Protestantism rejected Purgatory and the idea that souls were not immediately judged and sent to one afterlife or another. The existence of ghosts, then, had to be explained by other means. After all, ghosts were *real*. The solution? Ghosts were argued to be not the souls of the dead but actually other supernatural creatures (most often devils) in disguise! This difference of opinion between Catholicism and its reformers generated much earnest (and often ridiculous) debate over criteria for distinguishing ghosts that were human souls from those that were demonic in origin. This controversy, which Finucane gleefully replays for us, served only to give ghosts an increasingly ambiguous ontological status, dislocating them from the comfortable position they enjoyed in Catholicism's orderly universe. This section of the book, potentially long-winded and tedious, is kept fresh by the author's dry wit, which serves as a pleasant contrast to the often heavy-handed arguments he documents for us.

The best sections of this part of the book, however, come with the Enlightenment and the nineteenth-century period. As reason and critical thought were brought to bear on ghosts and other supernatural phenomena, many of the absurd features of spiritual visitation became the subject of devastating scrutiny. Witness, for example, the delightful controversy over the substance of ghostly clothing. For centuries, clerical prudery and public mores had kept ghosts decently covered in a wide variety of garments. Yet if ghosts were the souls of the dead, were their clothes also the spirits of their garments? Or were they made of a mystical substance? And who created this substance, and for what purpose? God? The Devil? Finucane documents how ghosts occupied a central place in the anti-religious arguments of the time, and became the butt of some extremely funny, often acid commentary by proponents of reason and free thinking. In this hostile environment, it is not surprising that the nineteenth century witnessed the decline of ghosts as both moral authorities and features of theological debate. The almost obsessive interest in ghosts during the Victorian era, which Finucane argues was due in part to the dreadful mortality rates in the new urban slums, was blamed by contemporaries on the loss of faith by the population. Whatever the reason for Victorian spiritualism, it is notable that since the 1890s our ghosts have not changed. Ghosts have become little more than random symbols of a belief in an immortal soul, but a soul without a cosmology or a place to belong.

While Finucane's review of the history of ghosts is informative, the best part of

this book really is the experiential level, the ghosts themselves. Finucane illustrates his thesis that ghosts are reflections of our cultural beliefs by showing us how the relationship between ghosts and their percipients has changed with time. In the closely knit social world of the Middle Ages, for example, you *knew* your ghost. Medieval ghosts haunted their relatives and friends, exhorting them to pay old debts, correct old wrongs, and avenge family insults. Medieval ghosts also had a gift for gab. They cajoled, threatened, beseeched, and harangued; some talked so much it seems they were actually lecturing their percipients rather than haunting them. With the Reformation debate over the origins of ghosts, we watch them change, becoming increasingly ambiguous and malevolent, reflecting the new perception of their possible demonic nature. As the years pass ghosts say less, and their behavior becomes more unusual and incomprehensible. By the nineteenth century, ghosts had become anonymous strangers, unintelligible in their actions and appearances. Their identities were and are now unknown to their percipients, a situation in striking contrast to the homey familiarity of medieval hauntings.

Finucane draws heavily on the casebooks of the British Society for Psychical Research (SPR) for his insights into Victorian ghosts, and his most interesting observations come from a close reading of the notes of the SPR investigators themselves, some of whom voiced doubts about the reality of many ghost sightings. As for the modern day, Finucane finds that twentieth-century ghosts are no different from their Victorian counterparts. Instead of confronting their percipients, speaking to them of death and morality, modern ghosts are almost always mute. They rush down hallways, disappear into walls, or are simply sounds, vapors, or sensations. With the decline of a common world-view, our connection to the next world has lost all coherence, but our desire for immortality remains. Now it is reduced from the visitations of relatives with a vested interest in the percipient to superficial, fleeting images of long-dead strangers.

Ultimately, I felt oddly nostalgic as I reached the end of this book. Dr. Finucane takes the ghost's point of view in presenting his accounts, and I felt a certain sadness and sense of humiliation as ghosts lost their dignity and sank into the province of spiritualists, side-show hucksters, and frauds. Finucane argues that ghosts are projections of the human need for assurance of immortality, of something beyond death. He clearly documents how ghosts serve this function, and how, as our views of the afterlife have become more and more diffuse, our ghosts have degenerated. In the context of his review, Finucane does a nice job of highlighting the many prosaic reasons for ghost sightings, ranging from the unbalanced mind (noted as a source of ghostly sightings since the Middle Ages) to attention-getting, social reinforcement, and plain old deceit and manipulation. None of these sources are developed in detail, but that is not the purpose of this text. This book is also chock full of terrific ghostly trivia. In its pages, many historic figures, from St. Augustine to Sir Christopher Wren, get their say about ghosts. We are also treated to the strange practices of our ancestors, such as cutting up the bodies of saints to make multiple shrines and admitting ghostly statements as evidence in court.

Personally, I would have liked to have known a little about European pagan beliefs in ghosts and hauntings, especially since New Age channelers often claim these sources as inspiration, but that is a small regret given the rich amount of material covered in *Appearances of the Dead*. I enjoyed this book immensely; it gives a good feel for the intellectual and cultural roots of ghosts and why they will continue to haunt us, not just in the present day, but most likely far into the future. •