Photoghosts: Images of the Spirit Realm?

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Ghosts Caught on Film: Photographs of the Paranormal. By Melvyn Willin. David & Charles, Devon, England, 2007. ISBN-13: 978-0-7153-2728-9. 156 pp. Hardcover, $16.99.

Since it was founded in London in 1882, the Society for Psychical Research (SPR) has conducted research into paranormal claims. Its founders' hope was to validate Spiritualist phenomena and so unite science and religion (Guiley 2000, 353). Over the subsequent century and a quarter, the society's archives have amassed an important collection of anomalous photographs that (with other collections such as the Fortean Picture Library) have been tapped for the book Ghosts Caught on Film: Photographs of the Paranormal. The compilation is by Dr. Melvyn Willin, the SPR's Honourable Archive Officer. It is at once an invaluable compendium—a selection of curious paranormal photos, many of which are treated with appropriate skepticism—and an annoying presentation with outright fakes sometimes obfuscated by excessive credulity.

Paranormalities

Willin appropriately debunks such notorious images as the 1917 Cottingley Glen fairy photographs produced by two schoolgirls using obvious cutouts (but fooling the likes of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle) (16–17), and a supposed séance materialization of spirit "Katie King" that is in fact a depiction of the medium Florence Cook posing "in her underwear" (Willin 18–19). He also correctly explains some images—a "Madonna and Child" seen in a fountain's splashing water, the face of a "cherub" gazing from a wedding posy, and the "Virgin Mary" outlined in tree branches (52–57)—as simulacra resulting from our ability to interpret random patterns, like inkblots or clouds, as recognizable pictures. Indeed, a "sacred elephant in the sky" (62–63) is merely a pachyderm-shaped cloud.

Still, Willin is unwilling, it seems, to avoid mystery mongering altogether. For example, he is too uncritical of "aura" photographs, including Kirlian photos (36–37; 12–43; cf. Nickell 2001, 142–149), as well as the allegedly psychically projected "thoughtographs" of Ted Serios (Nickell 1994, 197–198; Randi 1982, 222–227). Willin's main focus (so to speak), as his book's title makes clear, is on ghosts, and the majority of his questioned pictures are of that genre: here a spook, there a specter, elsewhere an apparition or phantom—a ghost (or spirit of the dead) by any other name.

However, it is important to realize that the earliest photographic processes recorded not a single ghost: not the early, impermanent experimental images of J. Nicephore Niepce in the first quarter of the nineteenth century nor the later experiments (1834–39) by Fox Talbot, who produced "fixed" prints on paper. The first practical photographic process, the daguerreotype (after L.J.M. Daguerre), which was announced in 1839, likewise recorded no ghosts. And the same is true of ambrotypes (from 1855) and tintypes (patented in 1856) (Coe 1989, 8–37; Nickell 1994, 4–29, 147–149).

Debut of Spirits

Not until glass-plate negatives came on the scene (about 1859), facilitating double imaging, did "ghosts" begin to appear in photographs. The first such fakes were produced by Boston photographer William H. Mumler. He discovered that when he recycled glass photographic plates, a faint image could remain and so appear as a dim image in subsequent pictures if the glass was not thoroughly cleaned. Spiritualism then being all the rage, Mumler went into business in 1862 as a "spirit photographer," eventually attracting such clients as Mary Todd Lincoln, whose portrait included a "spirit" image of her assassinated husband (22–23). However, Mumler was exposed as a fraud when people recognized that some of the supposed spirits were still among the living (Nickell 1994, 146–159, 192–196).

Nevertheless, "spirit" photography was off and running, later followed—if we make a distinction that Willin does not—by "ghost" photography. The difference? The former began in the studio and moved to include the séance room, the idea being that spirits of the departed were usually conjured up, summoned to appear in order to communicate with the living. In contrast, ghost photographs were typically made at supposedly haunted sites. And whereas spirit photos were invariably charlatans' productions, ghost photos could either be faked or appear inadvertently—as by reflection, accidental double exposure, or the like.

Willin would do well to note that ghost photos began to proliferate after portable cameras became available to amateurs during the 1880s—especially at the end of the decade when George Eastman introduced celluloid roll film for his Kodak camera (Nickell 1994 22–28, 158). Like the earliest spirit photos, those supposedly depicting ghosts showed them to look just like people, only more ethereal. In modern times, that would change when a variety of ghostly forms—such as strands of "ectoplasm" (an imagined spirit substance) or "orbs" (bright balls of "energy")—began to appear in snapshots. The main culprit was the pocket camera with a built-in flash. The burst of light could rebound from the wrist strap to produce the ectoplasmic strands or from

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dust particles or water droplets to yield orbs or from a wandering fingertip, hair, jewelry, etc., to produce various other shapes or blurs (Nickell 1994, 159).

Photo Analysis

To show how additional facts and analysis can help illuminate many alleged ghost photographs, here are a few from Willin's compendium that are especially deserving of such treatment.

Posing Spirits. A circa 1875 image by the notorious English spirit photographer Frederick Hudson depicts a seated man surrounded by shrouded figures. "Although known to dress up and pose as his own 'ghosts' and to use double exposure for cheating," concedes Willin, "Hudson was ultimately believed to have leavened his frauds with much genuine spirit photography." Reputedly, in this instance the sitter and two friends were permitted to operate the camera without Hudson's interference.

Never mind that Hudson allegedly used a specially gimicked Howell camera; it supposedly held a framed, pre-exposed image that moved into position while the sitter was being photographed (25). There are other inherent indicators that the photograph is bogus. If the extra figures are subtracted from the picture, the composition is unaccountably bad: the sitter is positioned not only off center (being both too far to the right and too low), but also too far away, so as to leave an unusual amount of surrounding space. One can rationalize that the additional space was left to make room for the spirits, but how would they have known just where to place themselves to make a pleasing arrangement? Most likely the chair and camera had been pre-positioned by Hudson, who had already photographed the "spirits." Still another indicator of faking comes from the figures' wearing shrouds. This seems less a convincing attire for ghosts than a suspiciously dramatic convention (as Willin himself notes in the following case).

Haunted Doorway. A figure, shrouded head-to-toe and appearing semi-transparently before the doorway of a thatched-roof building, was supposedly photographed in the 1920s. However, the image did not surface until 1993, and its place of origin is only assumed to be "probably England." Willin admits that "most people are suspicious of the dramatic drapery" since the majority of ghost sightings look like "real people in real clothes" (146–147). Yet he adds: "One day, technology could well tell us this apparition is exactly what it seems to be: a genuine paranormal presence."

What it really seems to be is a staged ghost photo. There is a well-known technique for producing such fakes that does not require any tampering with the negative or other darkroom deception. It was used by some spirit photographers: while the sitter remained motionless for the lengthy exposure, a confederate—suitably attired—simply appeared briefly behind the unwitting person, the result being a photo with a semi-transparent "spirit" (Nickell 1994, 152). The same effect can be produced accidentally when someone steps briefly into or out of a scene that is photographed with a long exposure (Nickell 1994, 158–159). Several other photos published by Willin may be of this type, as he himself somewhat grudgingly admits (e.g., 76–77, 86–87, 116–117, 132–133, 144–145).

Specter on the Stairs. A famous 1936 photograph of a too-good-to-be-true ghostly figure on a staircase was made at Raynham Hall in Norfolk, England, by a pair of reporters who claimed first to see the apparition and then to quickly take a picture of it. Willin sits on the fence—or is it the banister?—on this one, acknowledging that "there appear to be inconsistencies in the photo on the stair rail," while insisting that the negative appeared to be "genuine" and there was "a tradition of haunting" at the house (128–129). He adds, "Let the viewer decide."

And so expert viewers have. A careful examination of the photograph (in much greater enlargement than given in Willin's book) shows evidence of double exposure. "For example," note John Fairley and Simon Welfare in Arthur C. Clarke's Chronicles of the Strange and Mysterious (1987, 140), "there is a pale line above each stair-tread, indicating that one picture has been superimposed over the other; a patch of reflected light at the top of the right-hand banister appears twice." What likely happened is that the camera was shifted slightly during a long, two-stage exposure, one with a real figure briefly standing on the stairs. Hence, the negative would be unaltered. Photo expert Tom Flynn (2008) agrees with this assessment and cites clear evidence that the photo was not flash-illuminated but shot with available light, thus requiring a long exposure. This gives away the lie of the reporters' claim of having made a quick snapshot.

Spirit of "Old Nanna." A 1991 photo depicts a little boy who seems to be gazing up at a bright vortex of mist that intrudes into the photo. But is he really looking at the spirit of Old Nanna, his late great grandmother, as family members have suggested? Unfortunately, no one in the room at the time the picture was snapped perceived anything out of the ordinary. Although acknowledging that "there is not enough verifiable fact to support the appearance and photographing of a spirit," Willin cautions: "If the picture is fraudulent then the misty cloud should be explainable but it's far too big and dense to be, say, cigarette smoke. Neither is there anything to suggest a human form but, of course, what the boy saw and what we are permitted to see could be quite different" (20–21).

Ironically, the effect is clearly due to something that Willin is well aware of—acknowledging elsewhere (72) how frequently the "camera-strap syndrome" can cause just such an anomaly. He fails to recognize it in this instance even though it has the classic appearance produced by an unsecured strap getting in front of the lens. The braiding of the strap is even evident, an effect I have captured in experimental photographs (Nickell 1996, 13–14).

Palatial Apparition. At Middlesex, England's famed Hampton Court

Palace, on October 7, 2003, surveillance-camera footage captured a spooky, robed figure emerging from open fire doors. Alarms sounded on three occasions, but each time the doors were found closed. Although Willin cites the opinion of skeptic Richard Wiseman that the figure is likely a person in a costume, he ends by wondering, ". . . could this be the genuine image of an apparition on film, one of the most rare things in the world?" (142–143).

I had studied the photograph for SI magazine (Nickell 2004) and similarly determined that the image probably depicted an actual person. Examining a high-resolution electronic copy of the photo, I found a clearly solid figure accompanied by shadow patterns that are consistent with a real, human figure appearing in ambient light. The picture thus contrasts with most traditional "ghost" photos that depict transparent, ethereal figures. I suggested that although the footage might be unaltered, the actual event could well have been staged—as suggested by the repeated opening and closing of the doors and the fact that the incidents occurred during the pre-Halloween season.

These are only a few examples from Willin's compendium. Many others could be noted. Time and again, a spooky picture can best be explained by invoking Occam's razor—the rule that the simplest tenable explanation (the one requiring the fewest assumptions) is preferred. And so, other anomalous photos are likewise attributable to such factors as deliberate hoaxing, reflections, rebounding flash, defects of camera or film, simulacra, and other factors—not of another world, but of this one.

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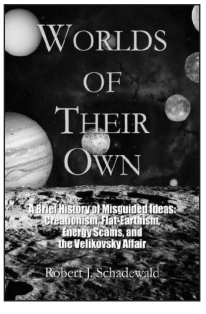
Randi, James. 1982. Flim Flam: Psychics, ESP, ideas that superficially seem plausible but on closer examination are internally contradictory or counter to what is possible in the real world. The term has been applied to circle-squarers, perpetual motionists, and those who believe the Earth is flat. Sometimes the term "fringe science" is used.

We must admit that in the history of science, some of the early "accepted" ideas would, if judged by the standards of today's science, qualify as pseudoscientific: astrology, alchemy, geocentric solar system models, the luminiferous ether. So how do we distinguish science from pseudoscience?

Bob Schadewald had a continuing interest in fringe science and pseudoscience. This posthumous collection of his published and unpublished materials (skillfully edited by Schadewald's sister Lois) is a highly readable account of several varieties of pseudoscience, including Flat Earth theories, perpetual motion, creationism, and predictions of the end of the world. The unifying theme is "fringe thinkers" who create their own versions of reality, contemptuous of the models of nature accepted by established mainstream science. Schadewald treats his subjects with respect and even sympathy (he knew many of them personally), but he clearly reveals why their ideas are flawed and misguided.

Here you will find the stories of colorful characters such as Immanuel Velikovsky, who rewrote the book on solar system astronomy; Charles Johnson, who was certain that Earth was as flat as a pancake; John Keely, who claimed he could tap etheric energy to power a freight train coast-to-coast on a gallon of water; and assorted creationists, who freely engaged in "lying for God."

One might suppose that these folks and their worldviews have little in common. Surely one who believes the Earth is flat and one who believes it is hollow cannot think alike. But, as this book reveals, they have more in common with each other than they do with mainstream science. Looming large in their thinking and their motivations was a literal belief in the King James Bible. Velikovsky used biblical sources freely. Flat earthers' beliefs were bound up with fundamentalist religious beliefs. Creationists and flat earthers have



Pseudoscientists and Their Worlds

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Worlds of Their Own: A Brief History of Misguided Ideas: Creationism, Flat-Earthism, Energy Scams, and the Velikovsky Affair. By Robert Schadewald. Xlibris, 2008. ISBN 978-1-4363-0435-1. 272 pp. Paper, $19.99; hard-

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The word pseudoscience is a bit slippery. It suggests something "fake" or "fraudulent"—something that is not a science but pretends to be. We can easily name some of the classic examples: astrology, phrenology, homeopathy, parapsychology, and creationism. People who promote such pseudosciences have been called "paradoxers," because they propose