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Report: Curran Fellowship 2015-16

Thank you very much to the Research Society for Victorian Periodicals for the generous support it provided for my research via the 2015-16 Curran Fellowship. I am writing to report on the progress of my project, ““Oral Testimony and Legitimate Records of Spiritualist Phenomena in William Stainton Moses’s *Light*.”

My goal for the research period was to make progress on an article/book chapter about William Stainton Moses, founder of the Victorian spiritualist periodical *Light* and one of four editors I am focusing on as part of a larger book project about the different rhetorical approaches Victorian spiritualist editors took to articulating the (mostly) shared principles of the spiritualist community. Stainton Moses’s approach, I argue, was very much shaped by his involvement in male-dominated organizations within and adjacent to the spiritualist community. Prior to his conversion to spiritualism, he served as a clergyman in the Anglican Church, and after his conversion, he was involved in the Society for Psychical Research, the British National Association of Spiritualists, the London Spiritualist Alliance, the Theosophical Society, and the Ghost Club, all of which placed men in prominent leadership positions.

Before receiving the Curran Fellowship, I had already conducted some research about the various organizations in which Stainton Moses participated, particularly using the Ghost Club records at the British Library. Still, in order to understand more fully Stainton Moses’s positions in these organizations and his approach to articulating spiritualist principles, I wanted to examine his personal notebooks, which are held at the College of Psychic Studies in London. These notebooks, which Stainton Moses kept from 1873 to 1883, provide important evidence for understanding Stainton Moses’s early development as a spiritualist medium, which I found was influenced by his training in the Anglican Church, as well as evidence of his interactions with other periodical editors and members of the spiritualist community, especially during his involvement with the British National Association of Spiritualists.

As a result of a 10-day trip to London in June 2016, my understanding of Stainton Moses’s early development as a spiritualist medium was enhanced, since his records of automatic writing in the private notebooks document his working out of specific spiritual issues, which were shaped by his Anglican background. These records, which involved deep questioning about spiritual issues on Stainton Moses’s part, later influenced his equally deep discussions with members of the Ghost Club, a club he founded in 1882 and used to discuss spiritualist concepts he wrote about in “Notes by the Way,” his regular column in *Light*.

For example, Stainton Moses’s Easter 1873 entry in his private notebooks is a detailed dialogue between him and one of his spirit guides about the resurrection of Christ, in which Stainton Moses is clearly sorting through ideas about the afterlife, both for “divine” beings such as Christ and mortal beings like himself. The manner in which Stainton Moses questions and responds to his spirit guides is very similar to the format in which he questions and responds to members of the Ghost Club over a decade later, when he discusses and rejects reincarnation, an issue

spiritualists considered especially after the rise of Theosophy, an alternative spiritual movement that accepted reincarnation.

My argument about Stainton Moses in the article/book chapter will center on the question-and-response format he used to gather information for his weekly column. The sharing of specific experiences with spiritualist phenomena, or “oral testimony,” clearly is an important aspect of Stainton Moses’s approach to articulating the key principles of spiritualism, and the notebooks provide insight into the process through which Stainton Moses worked out his ideas before presenting them to the public.

My understanding of Stainton Moses’s interactions with other spiritualist periodical editors was also enhanced by the time spent reading the private notebooks, since these interactions make clear the degree to which masculine competition was a part of Stainton Moses’s experience in the spiritualist community. Although the community was known, especially in its earlier years, for its support of the young, intuitive women who served as mediums in the community, as the century progressed, more formal organizational structures became necessary to compete with other alternative movements, such as the Society for Psychical Study and the Theosophical Society, and men played more prominent roles in the movement.

As the private notebooks indicate, the masculine competition between Stainton Moses and William Henry Harrison, editor of the BNAS official organ *The Spiritualist*, in the early 1880s led Stainton Moses to leave the BNAS and found the London Spiritualist Alliance, as well as *Light*. Stainton Moses’s private notebook from 1881 include detailed accounts of his frustration with Harrison, as well as specific accusations against the BNAS Harrison published in the *Spiritualist* and attempted to published in other spiritualist papers, including *Light*. These accounts provide the context for understanding Stainton Moses’s relationships with other men in the movement and the ways in which he established authority for himself in other organizations, including the Ghost Club. This context will play an important role in my argument about Stainton Moses’s approach to articulating spiritualist concepts, since he often responds to other male-edited spiritualist periodicals in his “Notes by the Way” column.

These are just two examples of the evidence I gathered by reading Stainton Moses’s private notebooks, and having completed the research I need for my article/book chapter, I have begun drafting my article/book chapter. Although I am under deadline to another article this semester, I expect that I still will be able to complete the draft of this article by the end of the year. I plan to submit the article version to *Victorian Periodicals Review* early next year, and I expect to continue work on the larger book project in the spring, when I will begin work on an article/book chapter about the final periodical editor in the project, James Burns.

I am deeply grateful for the support provided by RSVP for this project. I was able to complete research essential to the completion of this project, and I look forward to the opportunity to share the final product with the Society in the near future.