

HARRISON, William Henry (1841–97)

Photographer and promoter of spiritualistic science, William Henry Harrison was raised in North London and was educated at a school in Stoke Newington where he developed scientific skills. He trained as a telegraph operator at the Paddington branch of the Electric and International Telegraph Company, and was subsequently hired to maintain the Company's lines in Trowbridge, Chepstow and Haverfordwest. In Haverfordwest he began writing for local newspapers which led to his move to journalism. He ran a Merthyr newspaper firm and in the early 1860s moved to London where he became Cromwell VARLEY'S private secretary. During the 1860s he reported on scientific events for various periodicals including the *Daily Telegraph* and *Engineer*. He had strong interests in photography and was a prolific contributor to the *British Journal of Photography (BJP)* for which he wrote reports of scientific meetings, assessments of photographic innovations, and essays on the physical and chemical basis of photography. He championed Valentine Blanchard's method of preserving wet plates for outdoor use and in 1868 announced his invention of a bromide emulsion dry plate.

In 1868 he also gained his first direct experience of spiritualistic phenomena through Varley's wife, and séances with other mediums persuaded him that some manifestations were of genuine spiritual origin. In December 1869, having decided that spiritualism needed better publicity, he launched the *Spiritualist Newspaper*, a cheap monthly (weekly from 1874) that appealed mainly to bourgeois spiritualists. Subtitled *A Record of the Progress of the Science and Ethics of Spiritualism*, Harrison's paper was the most significant journal of spiritualistic science of the late Victorian period. Besides reports of séances and spiritualist meetings, it included accounts of scientific meetings, reviews of scientific works, and detailed appraisals of scientists' spiritualistic investigations. The *Spiritualist* provided an important forum for Varley, William CROOKES, and Alfred Russel WALLACE to present their spiritualistic

evidence, and it frequently contrasted this material to the 'unscientific' approach to spiritualism adopted by John TYNDALL and others. Passionate about rendering spiritualism credible, he promoted star mediums that he believed were genuine and exposed such fraudsters as bogus spirit photographers.

Harrison held that scientifically-educated spiritualists, not scientists, could best construct a proper science of spiritualism and unravel the natural laws of 'manifestations'. Accordingly, he used the *Spiritualist* to correct spiritualists' scientific blunders and explain how scientific instruments and protocols could be used in séances. Harrison ardently believed in spiritualistic organisation within *and* without séances, and in 1873 helped launch the British National Association of Spiritualists (BNAS) whose members actively supported the *Spiritualist*. In 1876 Harrison spearheaded the BNAS's 'Scientific Research Committee' which organised some of the most elaborate experimental investigations of spiritualism before the foundation of the Society for Psychical Research in 1882: between 1877 and 1879, for example, they used self-recording instruments to measure the weight changes experienced by mediums during materialisation séances. In late 1879 Harrison resigned from the BNAS after a serious conflict over Association policy. Consequently, the BNAS withdrew their support from the *Spiritualist* and launched their own periodical, *Light*, which largely contributed to the collapse of Harrison's serial in 1881. Harrison continued his journalistic career in the 1880s and contributed scientific articles to photographic and spiritualistic periodicals. He died on 10 August 1897.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

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Further Reading

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Richard Noakes