

BOOK REVIEW

Enquête sur 150 Ans de Parapsychologie en France: La Légende de l'Esprit [An Inquiry of 150 Years of Parapsychology in France: The Legend of the Mind] by Renaud Evrard. Escalquens, France: Trajectoire, 2016. 479 pp. €25.

Enquête sur 150 Ans de Parapsychologie en France is a history of various aspects of French psychical research. In spite of the previous work of authors such as Brady, Brower, Lachapelle, Le Maléfan, Méheust, and Plas, Evrard has much to say about many individuals, institutions, investigations, and issues, not to mention time periods, not covered by these authors.

Enquête has ten chapters focusing on the work of: Pierre Curie, Agénor de Gasparin, Pierre Janet, Eugène Osty, Timothée Puel, Charles Richet, René Sudre, René Warcollier, and two later figures: François Favre and Nicolas Maillard. Evrard's discussion not only covers the actual parapsychological work of these individuals, but also includes various social and institutional aspects related to them and to their times.

The book is at its best in terms of social aspects of French psychical research, particularly issues such as conflicts and criticisms. Examples of this include problems within the Institut Métapsychique International, such as those dealing with Jean Meyer and Hubert Forestier. Evrard presents information about how Richet was perceived, and about controversies surrounding his work, particularly his observations of materializations with medium Marthe Béraud, which brought him criticism from many writers who assumed he had been deceived. In fact, this critical literature, some of which appeared in popular magazines and newspapers, created strong negative images of psychical research among the scientific and general public. Evrard actually concludes that the end result was that many individuals believed that Richet was fooled by a young girl at Algiers. Furthermore, he stated, summarizing the opinion of many: "In 1905 Richet's metapsychics was considered one of the menaces against reason" (p. 203).

In addition to the above-mentioned individuals, Evrard also presents information about other persons. Examples are discussions of Robert Amadou, Henri Bergson, Rémy Chauvin, Bernard de Cressac, Gustave Geley, Paul Gibier, Joseph Maxwell, Marc Thury, Robert Tocquet, and Mario Varvoglis. I find Gibier and Maxwell particularly interesting. Both men authored influential books, as seen in *Le Spiritisme* (Gibier 1886) and

Les Phénomènes Psychiques (Maxwell 1903). Among other contributions, Gibier reported remarkable materialization phenomena he obtained with Mrs. Salmon, the pseudonym of Carrie Sawyer (Gibier 1901), and Maxwell (1903) discussed mediumistic personification.

I was also glad to see discussions of individuals such as Timothée Puel and François Favre who are not generally known outside France. Evrard also writes about figures who are well-known, but who do not receive much discussion in modern writings, at least not whole chapters (Osty, Sudre, Warcollier). The author writes that after his initial work Warcollier became interested in the dynamics of the unconscious regarding telepathy:

In support of his reflections, he gave some examples of telepathy “of the poorly perceived,” or “of the recently forgotten,” and of cases in which what appeared to be transmitted was not what the emitter wanted to transmit . . . [but consisted of] information lying in its subconscious while focusing attention on something else. . . . The dream was a point of departure for Warcollier, following Freud . . . Warcollier proposed to analyze telepathic communication like dreams. (p. 369)

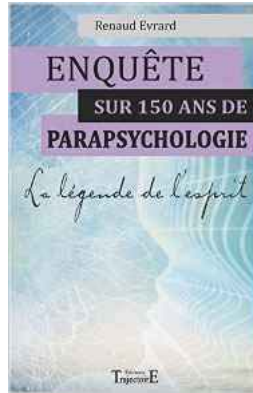
Such analyses included various processes: Among them, instances of imagery associations and distortion.

Fascinating discussions of all these figures present a complex picture of the past, one formed as much by the influence of personal and professional factors as by the actual work conducted. While Evrard explores these issues, he also offers information about events such as the international congresses of psychology and the presence of psychical research in their programs, and about several important institutions.

One of the latter was the Institut Général Psychologique, a group that included psychic phenomena together with various psychological topics. As time went on, the Institut shed psychical research from its programs. The *Bulletin* of the Institut included the famous report about seances with Eusapia Palladino held between 1905 and 1908 authored by Jules Courtier (1908). The study is an unique one in the mediumistic literature for various reasons. One is that the researchers not only studied the physical phenomena of Palladino, but they also investigated aspects of her psychology, physiology, and the surrounding physical environment, such as heat, electricity, and magnetism. In addition, the *Bulletin* had a few other papers about topics such as the action of the hand on the growth of plants (Favre 1905).

Furthermore, Evrard has much to say about other topics of general interest for those seriously interested in history. These include issues that distort views of the past (e.g., presentism, “great man” history), and the topics of demarcation and reflexivity. Interestingly, Evrard briefly

discusses his own involvement in parapsychology as a potentially limiting factor in his writing. He is aware that some may see him as a member of the culture he is trying to study, and that consequently his discourse may be perceived as lacking objectivity, as an example of “partisan propaganda” (p. 29). Evrard opposes this, pointing out that he has worked independently of groups and specific ideas, trying to place himself in the middle of internal and external perspectives with regard to parapsychology. Such a position is a difficult, but a fairly common one in the history of science, where the distinction between practitioner and professional historian still exists. Many biologists, physicians, physicists, and psychologists, to name a few professions, have contributed and still contribute to the history of their disciplines. Sometimes, particularly when they write in disciplinary journals or books, they have agendas that justify areas of research, research programs, and theoretical models. Evrard has his own clear investments in parapsychology as a field, as seen in his work on behalf of the field via the Institut Métapsychique International and, more recently, the Parapsychological Association. But this hardly disqualifies him for the task at hand. In fact, I have not found evidence of a partisan view in his book. On the contrary, sometimes he seems to be ultra-objective, as when he raises unanswerable questions, as opposed to possible interpretations, which he also presents. All in all, a good balance.



Although I can hardly criticize the author for this, I would have liked to see more in the book about specific issues that interest me. This includes a more detailed discussion of Richet’s actual work reported in his classic paper “La Suggestion Mentale et le Calcul des Probabilités” (Richet 1884), an influential pioneering article in which Richet reported statistically evaluated experiments of “mental suggestion,” but which also included discussions of other topics generally ignored by later commentators (on these topics see Alvarado 2008). Similarly, more could have been said about Janet’s use of ideas from Frederic W. H. Myers. Janet stated: “To my knowledge, the author who has contributed the most to develop the scientific study of spiritistic phenomena is certainly M. Fr. Myers” (Janet 1889:403). But the influence Myers had on Janet was limited to ideas of subconscious functioning that did not include “supernormal” phenomena such as telepathy. This was a selective use of Myers that was not unique to Janet, as seen in the work of others, among them Alfred Binet (Alvarado 2010).

Another issue is the organization of the chapters. Although they are

very informative, the narrative in many chapters about specific individuals is frequently interrupted by long sections, sometimes appearing in gray columns, about various other persons, issues, or organizations. Several chapters lose their focus with the inclusion of too much peripheral information. Although I actually enjoyed and learned much from these sections, I am concerned that others may consider the material to be strangely placed extended footnotes or appendices.

In addition to discussions of the actual French psychical work, the great value of this work lies in the rich description of social aspects, and the recognition of the sociological and epistemological issues associated with the subject. While the problems are not solved, as Evrard is aware, he illuminates the elements forming the complex tapestry of what Richet and so many others in France called “la métapsychique,” and on the development of parapsychology in general.

CARLOS S. ALVARADO

Research Fellow

Parapsychology Foundation, New York City

carlos@theazire.org

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