

BOOK REVIEWS

Icelandic Spiritualism: Mediumship and Modernity in Iceland by William H. Swatos, Jr., and Loftur Reimar Gissurarson. New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 1996, xvii +270 pp. \$32.95 (c). ISBN 1560002735.

This book provides a succinct history of the study of paranormal phenomena in modern Iceland, that is, from about 1880 to the present. Although it has seven chapters, I believe the history can be considered to have three phases.

In the first phase an interest in the study of paranormal phenomena, then called psychical research, arose in part under the influence of spiritualism in Europe and North America and in part from the publications of the founders of the (British) Society for Psychical Research. The development of the research took a different course in Iceland compared with that in other Western countries, because, as the authors state, the equivalent in Iceland of the (British) Society for Psychical Research “remained separate from but intimately related to the state religion [Lutheran Protestantism]” (p. 69). Thus, whereas in Great Britain the early psychical researchers received little support and some opposition from religious leaders, in Iceland its homologous society’s leadership “had a significant component from the clergy” (p. 69). In a long introduction on the history of religion in Iceland the authors endeavor to show that Iceland developed a state religion that, unlike some religions, encouraged freedom of inquiry. Spiritualism and research about it did not threaten religion in Iceland. Yet not all the clergy favored inquiries into spiritualism; some opposed them, and one chapter of the book has the title “Conflict in the Church.”

The middle section of the book provides an excellent summary of the physical mediumship of Indridi Indridason, who was one of the most gifted physical mediums of all time. He was also one of the most carefully studied, with regard both to the control of the medium during sittings and to the care with which the observers made notes of the phenomena that occurred.

In the third, and we could say present phase of Icelandic spiritualism no startling phenomena have been recorded. The study of paranormal phenomena has not languished, however. The authors describe the careers during recent years of several remarkable mediums. The best-known of these — and the only one known personally to me — is Hafsteinn Björnsson. He produced impressive communications from at least two communicators of the “drop in” type. (This means that the communicators gave identifying information about deceased persons who had been completely unknown to the medium and sitters before they manifested at a sitting.) Hafsteinn also cooperated in a (moderately) successful experimental test of his ability to identify correctly deceased persons related to sitters whose identity the experimenters concealed from the medium.

Iceland has also been a country where apparitions and poltergeists, if not commonplace, may be talked about openly as if they are to be expected from time to time. The book recounts two instances of poltergeists.

Erlendur Haraldsson, a Professor of Psychology at the University of Iceland, has led the current phase of the study of paranormal phenomena. The authors of this work appropriately dedicate it to him.

The book contains one unfortunate lapse. Every country involved in studying paranormal phenomena has thrown up at least one crank, who has put forward a comprehensive theory of everything. Iceland's contribution to this type was a geologist called Helgi Pjeturss. He published books with weird assertions that discarnate personalities lived on other stars or planets. Not surprisingly, a cult developed around him and his books. The authors of the present work strangely bracket Helgi Pjeturss with Sir Oliver Lodge (p. 214). They thus appear to endorse a myth occasionally encountered in less reliable histories of psychical research. According to this myth, the death of Lodge's son Raymond in the First World War and Lodge's conviction that Raymond had communicated to him through mediums after his death converted him to spiritualism, and he thereafter lost all of his critical faculties. This is quite untrue; Lodge believed in the survival of human personality after death before Raymond's death, and he remained critical of evidence concerning it until his own death.

The book is well produced with adequate references and an index. Some of the notes are extremely long and made me ask whether with more work their content could have been worked into the text for the benefit of the reader.

This book should be in the library of everyone interested in the history of the study of paranormal phenomena. It should also be read by students of what might be called the sociology of religion.

Ian Stevenson
Department of Psychiatric Medicine
University of Virginia School of Medicine
Charlottesville, Virginia 22908

The Physical and Psychological Effects of Meditation by Michael Murphy and Steven Donovan. Sausalito, CA: Institute of Noetic Sciences, 1997. Second Edition, edited with an Introduction by Eugene Taylor, Ph.D. ISBN 0-943951-36-4.

When one first opens *The Physical and Psychological Effects of Meditation*, the first thing likely to be noticed is that almost half of the book is bibliography (129 pages out of 282). This is what differentiates this book from most other books on the subject. Rather than describe what meditation is and how to practice a particular type of meditation, the authors have attempted to com-