

## BOOK REVIEW

**Charles Richet: A Nobel Prize Winning Scientist’s Exploration of Psychic Phenomena** by Carlos S. Alvarado. White Crow Books, 2019. 212 pp. ISBN 978-1-78677-111-7.

### REVIEWED BY RENAUD EVRARD

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Carlos S. Alvarado is a well-known specialist of the history of parapsychology, and also famous for his pedagogical skills mostly as an affiliate of the Parapsychology Foundation and the Alvarado and Zingrone Institute for Research and Education. Most of the material used in this book was already available online on his blog (<https://carlossalvarado.wordpress.com>), as it is a collection of previously published essays. I am one of the people who publicly endorsed the book because Alvarado is clearly one of the most qualified authors able to deal with this topic, but here I will provide complementary expertise based on my reading of the book and my own work on the history of French parapsychology (Evrard, 2016). (I also contributed to Appendix E, “Bibliography about and by Charles Richet with emphasis on psychic phenomena,” pp. 119–132.)

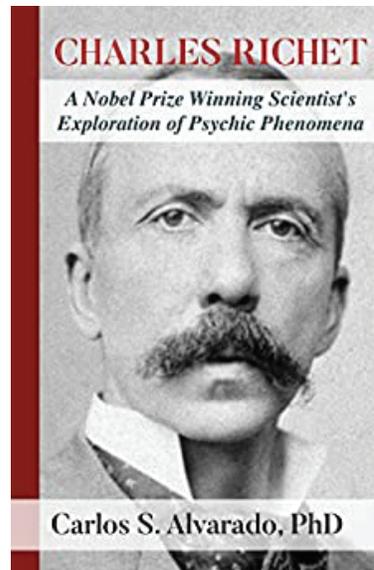
Charles Richet (1850–1935) was a French physiologist (Nobel laureate 1913) who contributed to many fields, among them psychology and psychical research. The book gathers six essays and tries to exhaustively cover these specific contributions through various lenses: a general overview of his interest in psychic phenomena (Chapter 1, pp. 1–26), a discussion of his metapsychic autobiography (Chapter 2, pp. 27–44), an analysis of his early ideas on mental suggestion and his pioneering use of probabilities in human sciences (Chapter 3, pp. 45–54), his various attempts to create gateways between psychology and

psychical research (Chapter 4, pp. 55–66), a review of his masterpiece *Traité de Métapsychique* (Chapter 5, pp. 67–84), and a final comment about his own conclusions regarding what he learned from psychical research and the survivalist hypothesis (Chapter 6, pp. 85–96). The first four appendices cover small historical points such as Richet’s séances with famous medium Leonora Piper (pp. 97–102), one on his observations of moving ectoplasm (pp. 103–104), a note about the term “ectoplasm” (which he didn’t coin) (pp. 105–106), and an extract from his *Traité* (pp. 107–118) about the scientific stature of “metapsychics,”

his own term for parapsychology, in which we see an illustration of his clever and Hugolian style of expression.

This format (collection of essays) is quite frustrating as the transformation into a book keeps the original writing style, with separated focus points and no clear transitions or ending. We don’t have a general contextualized view that historians or lay readers usually expect, but this is an exhaustive approach that covers all the material relative to Richet. The book is therefore a must-have for every researcher who would like a clear view of this complex person. It deserves the moniker of researcher handbook thanks to Appendix E (“Bibliography about and by Charles Richet with emphasis on psychic phenomena,” pp. 119–132) and Appendix F (“Bibliography about the history of psychical research and related areas,” pp. 133–142), the References section (pp. 145–173), the Notes (pp. 175–187) associated with each chapter, and the final Index (pp. 189–198). All in all, half of the book is made up of scholarly tools for this specialized topic.

Alvarado has created a truly historical work and he has extensive knowledge of all the primary sources written in various languages. Except for some very small mistakes and missing facts (such as the dates of birth and death of the medium Marthe Béraud, p. 6), the material



is relevant and fact-checked. Readers may enjoy these “encyclopaedic” articles such as Chapter 1, which is a very accessible treasure of concision. Others may regret that this or that point is only mentioned, diluting its epistemological significance, without transitions among the different bullet points. For instance, regarding the scandal around the Villa Carmen experiments in Algiers (1905), Alvarado allocated one paragraph in the main text and one endnote, and referred to several relevant reviews. We could find that rather short compared with the impact that this scandal had on Richet’s scientific reputation. But this book is all about offering an overview.

The analysis of Richet’s metapsychical autobiography (Chapter 2, pp. 27–44) is an analysis exercise on how such oriented texts distort the truth and how historians should handle them. As concluded by Alvarado, this chapter of Richet’s autobiography is less detailed than the others, and produces an account with important omissions and errors (p. 40).

It seems very difficult to give a true picture of a man with so many facets and who was so neglected, therefore Alvarado tried to pull threads so as not to get lost. Thus, the analysis of his important article of 1884 on mental suggestion and statistics (Chapter 3, pp. 45–54) is an opportunity to question the scientific and methodological context of the time. However, the chapter is more like a critical edition with a step-by-step commentary on Richet’s article which Alvarado is committed to presenting to the public. This sometimes gives a somewhat laborious reading where pedagogy takes precedence over historical analysis, that is to say where it is difficult to perceive the author’s own ideas.

When I turned a page and found myself at the beginning of the Appendices while still at the middle of the book, my frustration was great. How to conclude? Can we do it? I would like to read more. We must congratulate Alvarado for having laid these few bricks and hope that others will quickly seize them to build the rest of the building.

## REFERENCE

- Evrard, R. (2016). *Enquête sur 150 ans de parapsychologie. La légende de l’esprit*. Trajectoire.