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The Ashgate Research Companion to Nineteenth-Century Spiritualism and the Occult contains a collection of seventeen essays by mainly British and North American authors which attempt to bring recent scholarship on Victorian Spiritualism and Occultism to both academics and a more general audience. The essays are divided into three broad categories, the interface of Spiritualism and the Occult with science, with politics and literature, and with popular culture. The length of this review does not allow an in depth analysis of each individual chapter, consequently I have only remarked upon those which I found the most worthy of note.

I must confess I started with the third section as the subject matter seemed the most likely to be interesting and so it was. All seven of the chapters deal with different aspects of the relationship between Spiritualism and other aspects of Victorian popular culture; some are both surprising and enlightening. Marlene Tromp’s investigation into the importance of food and dining in the context of the séance is fascinating, not just in the suggested parallel with the Eucharist, but the entire relationship between food, sexuality and the role of women in the Victorian era. The importance of photography in the work of Victorian spiritualists is considered in an absorbing chapter by Sarah Wilburn, which reflects not just upon the Victorian interest in photography but on how it affects the modern reader’s comprehension of history. Also of interest was the piece on Henry James’s ghost stories and the neat little essay discussing the relationship between fiction and autobiography in the work of Florence Marryat. All the chapters reflecting on popular culture were careful not to be drawn into discussion of the reality or otherwise of the spirit phenomenon, whilst this is usual in this kind of literature, it must have been hard not to comment on some of the photographs.

The second section “Occulture: Sex, Politics, Philosophy and Poetics”, also contains some well written and thought provoking material. The first chapter in the section deals with the life and work of Edward Bulwer-Lytton, a timely
re-evaluation as his contribution to the development of popular occult beliefs is increasingly overlooked. That could not be said of the subject of the second chapter, Edward Carpenter. Carpenter is now perhaps most famous as a sexual reformer. Joy Dixon seeks to re-evaluate Carpenter’s sexuality in the context of his spirituality as the driving force of his socialism. It is interesting to consider how much more compartmentalised attitudes to spirituality and other interests have become in an increasingly secularised environment. Victorians, as we are frequently reminded throughout this volume, had no such inhibitions. Furthermore, one could sometimes be forgiven for thinking that magic and the occult do not exist outside of Europe and North America, given the Eurocentric nature of academic interest in the subject, so it is pleasing that included in this collection is the essay “The Turn of the Gyres: Alterity in ‘The Gift of Harun Al-Rashid’ and *A Thousand and One Nights*” by the Lebanese scholar of English literature, Mazen Naous. It is indeed primarily an analysis of his poetry, rather than Yeats’ magical work, however because they are so interwoven this does not distract from the theme of occultism but refreshingly poses it within the framework of a different discipline.

The first section is made up of a collection of essays that consider the relationship between science and spiritualism in the Victorian world. Christine Ferguson’s paper, which opens the section, provides an informative and succinct overview of recent scholarship and would be useful to anyone wanting to research the subject further. The idea that spiritualism was a form of science that could be used to prove matters that had previously been subjects of belief is discussed at length by Richard Noakes, who puts forward some interesting thoughts on the construction of the vocabularies used to negotiate the discourse between science and spiritualism. Other essays consider the technological developments that occurred around spiritualism, for example the development of typewriters and automatic writing, and the parallel of women as stenographers and mediums. Jill Galvin tackles the question of post human discourse in relation to the Victorian’s evolutionist conception of the spirit. The relationship between spiritualism and science was far more complex than may be thought at first glance, and faith and belief were not always unique to the spiritualists.

The quality of writing and research thought the volume is uniformly high and the illustrations are clear and pertinent to the text. Whilst there is nothing truly ground breaking or exceptionally attention-grabbing, there is plenty of solid, well-researched material, for the most part interestingly presented and well arranged. The introduction clearly sets out the terms of reference and although a few of the essays are somewhat ponderous in tone, most of
them are an enjoyable read.

The Ashgate Research Companions series is a valuable resource and generally contains sound scholarship, presented in imaginative collections, and this is true of this volume. The notes on the dust jacket claim that it is “Designed both for those new to the field and for experts,” it would be a beneficial addition to an academic library and indispensable to anyone contemplating post graduate work in this area, however, the inference that it would be of interest to the general public is I suspect over optimistic, especially at the advertised price.

Overall, I found the volume very slightly disappointing, perhaps it would have been less so if its title had been restricted to Victorian Spiritualism, because the work directly on the Occult was so limited as to make its inclusion in the title almost tokenistic. There is an explanation of the use of the term “occult” in this context in the introduction, but I only got to that after I had spent some time reflecting on why an anthology addressing nineteenth century occultism was without an essay on either Aleister Crowley or Samuel Mathers. However the term occult is defined, it does seem rather like Hamlet without the Prince of Denmark with those two pivotal figures.