A Case of Spirits

The beginnings of spirit photography in America

Bill Jay

According to a definition adopted by the National Spiritualist Association of America, spiritualism “is the science, philosophy and religion of continuous life, based upon the demonstrated fact of communication, by means of mediumship, with those who live in the spirit world.” The idea that disembodied spirits of the dead are able, and willing, to communicate with the living, under certain conditions, is the basis of many ancient religions. Its theme re-occurs in myths, fables, legends and anecdotes from all cultures at all periods in man’s history. But it is also fair to say that modern spiritualism, as a social phenomena, had its origins in a small house in Hydesville, New York, on Friday night 31 March 1848.
The previous December, John D. Fox, his wife Margaret, and two younger daughters, Margaret and Kate, moved into an old farmhouse. The house had a strange reputation. The previous tenant had left it because of mysterious night noises.

The Fox family did not suffer unduly until March, 1848. Raps, knocks and the noise of moving furniture were heard at night. They increased in frequency and volume until on 31 March there was a particularly loud and continued outbreak of inexplicable sounds. By this time the Fox family was tired from lack of sleep and went to bed early. Almost immediately the noises began. An investigation of the whole house revealed nothing. It was the youngest daughter, Kate, who was to begin, unknowingly, a new social movement. The seven-year-old girl noticed that when her father was shaking the window sashes to see if they were loose and therefore a possible cause of the raps, the noises seemed to reply. She asked the noises to follow her claps. As she clapped her hands, the sound emanating from the house followed with the same number of raps. When she stopped, the sound ceased for a while. She assumed that someone was playing tricks on them as the next day was 1 April, April Fool’s Day. Her mother was not so sure:

I then thought I could put a test that no one in the place could answer. I asked the noise to rap my different children’s ages, successively. Instantly each one of my children’s ages were given correctly, pausing between them sufficiently long to individualize them until the seventh, at which a longer pause was made, and then three more emphatic raps were given, corresponding to the age of the little one that died, which was my youngest child.1

She then asked, “Is this a human being that answers the questions?” There was no rap. She said, “If it is a spirit, make two raps.” Two sounds instantly occurred. With this method of communication, Margaret Fox determined that the noise-maker was the spirit of a 31-year-old man who had been murdered in this house and his remains buried in the cellar. It was also communicated that the victim’s family consisted of a wife and five children, two sons and three daughters, all living at the time of his death but his wife had since died. Margaret Fox asked “him” if he would continue to give answers by raps if she called in the neighbours. The spirit agreed.

Before long the house was full of friends and neighbours who all asked questions of the spirit and received raps in answer. One neighbour, a Mr Duelser, ascertained that the victim was murdered in the east bedroom about five years ago; that his name was Charles B. Rosma, that he was a peddler; that his throat was cut with a butcher’s knife; that the body was taken through the buttery, down the stairway and that it was buried ten feet below the surface of the ground; that he was murdered for his money – $500. By now the house was full of people – even fishermen from the local creek were called in. All heard the same questions and answers, and many stayed in the house all night. By the next night the mysterious events at the Fox house had spread throughout the community. It was estimated that 300 people were present and heard the spirit communications, which continued through the Sunday.

Meanwhile, John Fox and some neighbours began digging in the cellar, but stopped their search when they hit water. The digging recommenced the next summer. On this occasion the men found some human hair and bones which were pronounced by doctors to have belonged to a human skeleton. The missing skeleton was not found until 56 years later, when some posts of a wall, three feet from the true wall of the cellar, fell down. Between the walls was a complete human skeleton, with a pedlar’s tin box near the bones.
Mrs Fox concluded her affidavit, written four days after the first communication, with these words:

I am not a believer in haunted houses or supernatural appearances. I am very sorry there has been so much excitement about it. It has been a great deal of trouble to us. It was our misfortune to live here at this time, but I am willing and anxious that the truth should be known and that a true statement should be made. I cannot account for these noises; all that I know is that they have been heard repeatedly as I have stated

John D. Fox also signed a statement certifying that his wife’s account was true in all particulars. He also complained of the disruption to his life: “It has caused a great deal of trouble and anxiety. Hundreds have visited the house, so that it is impossible for us to attend to our daily occupations …” His wife became increasingly upset and her hair turned white. The spirit increased his repertoire beyond raps to include the sound of the death struggle, throat gurgles and the noise of a body being dragged across the room. Finally the Fox family moved out. But the spirit lingered on – the house was often full of visitors conversing with the dead peddler.

Strangely, the raps also followed the family. The daughters were separated; Kate when to live with her brother in Auburn, and Margaret with her older sister, Leah, in Rochester, New York. The raps broke out in both places, and Leah found that she was also a catalyst for spirit activity. The sounds and physical disturbances were now centred on the Fox sisters rather than on the spirit of the murdered peddler.

On 14 November 1849 the first public meeting of spiritualists took place in the Corinthian Hall, the largest meeting place in Rochester. The public was outraged, and the Fox sisters were nearly lynched. Three different citizens' committees were formed to investigate the girls and the phenomena. Each one made a favourable report and was therefore disbanded and the investigation turned over to another, hopefully more critical, group. All the investigators were convinced of the genuineness of the phenomena. The public was incensed; passions rose to murderous anger. But in spite of such hostility the Fox sisters made lifetime careers of their mediumship, submitted to in numerable investigations and became centres of controversy wherever they went.

Public outrage fuelled the enthusiasm of the believers. Fanning outwards from its source in the North-East, spiritualism ran rampant throughout the country. In 1851 there were over 10 mediums in New York alone; by 1855 there were over 2 million spiritualists in America.
This extraordinary social movement received an unexpected impetus when allied with the "truth" of photography. Spirit photography began at 258 Washington Street, Boston, Massachusetts, in March 1861. The photographer was William Howard Mumler. Fortunately, a detailed account of his activities is available in The Personal Experiences of William H. Mumler in Spirit Photography, "written by himself" and published in 1875. This is a fascinating account of Mumler's beginnings as a medium/photographer and of the following 14 years of praise and condemnation, wealth and poverty, success and failure. His career was full of vicissitudes and he died in poverty in 1884, although he could write:

And yet, as I look back upon my past experience, I feel that I have been the gainer, personally, for all the sacrifices I have made, and all the troubles I may have endured in the knowledge I have gained of a future-existence. And in the soul-satisfaction of being a humble instrument in the hands of the invisible host that surrounds us for disseminating his beautiful truth of spirit-communion.

Mumler's radical change of careers and lifestyle was precipitated by a seemingly innocent and innocuous event. He was employed as head engraver at the leading Boston firm of jewellers, Bigelow Brothers and Kennard, where he had a reputation as an honest and trustworthy person. He seems to have had a happy-go-lucky type of disposition and was not at all interested in spiritualism. But he was "somewhat interested" in photography and numbered several professionals among his acquaintances. One day in March 1861 Mumler was in a friend's studio and tried to take a picture of himself by focusing the camera on an empty chair and springing into

position after uncapping the lens. After development the image revealed an extraneous figure (later called an “extra”) – sitting in the chair – a young girl whose figure faded away towards her feet. Mumler was astonished. He showed the plate to his photographer-friend who explained that the image was probably made on an old sheet of glass which was insufficiently cleaned, so that the previous negative was redeveloped to produce a hazy outline along with the more recent exposure. “This theory” said Mumler, “was at the time, with my limited knowledge of photography, acceptable, and when asked by my employers and others how the picture was produced, the above statement was given.” At this stage, Mumler considered the image a mere novelty.
A short time later he was visited by a known spiritualist “and being of a jovial disposition, always ready for a joke, I concluded to have a little fun, as I thought, at his expense.” Mumler showed his visitor the print, saying “this picture was taken by myself when there was no visible person present but myself.” It was true enough, but the unclean plate explanation was withheld. The visitor was duly impressed.

But the joke backfired. A week later, Mumler received a copy of the Herald and Progress, published in New York by Andrew Jackson Davis, which contained a long description of the picture with Mumler’s name and statement.

I felt, on reading this statement, considerably mortified in seeing my name in public print in support of what at that time I thought to be a kind of misrepresentation, but feeling really innocent of any evil intention, and knowing that New York was many miles away, and I an humble and secluded engraver, I thought nobody would be damaged much.4

But Mumler was not to be immune from notoriety. A local Boston spiritualist journal, Banner of Light, reprinted the New York article and in addition gave the address of the studio in which the picture had been made. Mumler decided to visit the studio and inform the owner “of the mischief I had done.” It was too late. The reception room was full of people anxious to see the first spirit photograph. The receptionist (who later became Mrs Mumler) introduced him as the photographer. Even though Mumler insisted that photography was not his business, and that the image had a physical explanation, he was so pressed with requests for portraits that he “reluctantly acquiesced.” Intending to put a stop to all the fuss he took two of the gentlemen to the studio and made a number of portraits. On one of them was an extraneous image. Mumler wrote: “I hardly knew what to say or how to act; the result of the last sitting was so entirely different from what I expected, that I was fairly bewildered.” The demand for portraits by the people waiting in the reception room was now incessant and relentless. Mumler agreed to take portraits for two hours a day, hoping that he could take this amount of time from his jewellery duties. Those present immediately booked their names for a sitting - enough to keep Mumler employed for the next three months. He soon found it necessary to devote himself full time to spirit photography. His autobiography gives accounts of over 50 prominent-named individuals who were satisfied with his results.

One of these individuals who had a special ability to expose any fraudulent activity during the photographic process was Alexander Black. Black was a long-established professional with a national reputation who regularly contributed articles to the Philadelphia Photographer, and authored the textbook for amateurs: Photography Indoors and Out. He became somewhat notorious for his series “Miss Jerry” – the first picture play, a combination of fiction and photography.

Initially Black sent one of his pupils, Horace Weston, to Mumler’s studio with instructions to witness the whole process. Weston received a spirit image of his father. Reporting to Black and his staff, Weston told them of the “extra” and “they shouted with laughter, and declared that I had been deceived.” Black decided to investigate personally and sent Weston back to Mumler with a message: “If Black could witness the whole operation and he received a spirit image, he would give Mumler 50 dollars.”

Mumler agreed. Black arrived quickly and the camera to be used was pointed out to him. It was thoroughly checked. Next, Black examined the sheet of glass and ascertained that it was perfectly clean. From then on, Black did not let the glass out of his sight, examining the chemicals, the tools and the plate holder, and carrying the sensitized plate in its holder out of the darkroom. He even walked backwards to the posing chair so that he would not lose sight of the plateholder even for a second. After the exposure? Black carried the plateholder back to the darkroom and again examined the chemical baths and equipment. He said, “You are not smart enough to put any thing on that negative without my detecting it.” Mumler agreed, very much aware that he was the novice photographer in the presence of an internationally famous figure. As Black watched the development, an extra gradually appeared; it was a man leaning his arm on Black’s shoulders. Mumler refused to accept payment. As Mumler wrote: “Now here is a plain statement of facts that cannot be successfully contradicted, as I have sufficient evidence to prove the above statement in a court of law, if necessary.’5

Success followed success, as investigator followed investigator. Henry T. Child, a doctor from Philadelphia, visited Boston expressly to investigate the phenomena. Before leaving Philadelphia he had a crash course in photographic manipulations from a well-known professional. He also brought with him his own glass plates, diamond engraved with intricate characters in order to eliminate the possibility of substitute plates. He witnessed the entire portrait and processing procedure twice – and received spirit forms on both plates.

In spite of these satisfied customers, public opinion was against him. He was denounced in the press and threatened with arrest. Eventually, spirit photography became unpopular and Mumler found it necessary to close his business in the hostile atmosphere of Boston. Even spiritualists turned against him when it was discovered that he obtained from time to time the portrait extras of people still alive. This was scandalous and a mockery of the spiritualist idea that the materialisations and extras were messengers of the existence of life beyond death. Mumler decided to move to New York in l868.

Initially he had great difficulty in finding a studio; his reputation as trickster had preceded him. He was reaching desperation when he was given a trial by W.W. Silver, owner of a portrait photography business at 630 Broadway. Ironically, the sitter's name was Mr Trickey! An extra was produced, and the previously sceptical Silver was impressed; he, too, sat for a portrait in his own studio, in front of his own camera, and all the operations being conducted under his careful scrutiny and with his own chemicals. The spirit of his mother appeared in the image. Mumler had a studio in which to work.

Quickly his business prospered, so much so that within a few months Mumler was able to buy out Silver and became sole owner and proprietor of the studio.

Hardly had this change taken place than Mumler was arrested by order of the Mayor of New York. This was a serious matter because the Mayor had a reputation for harshness; a person arrested was as good as a prisoner convicted. Fortunately, Mumler was tried before a judge with a singular reputation for fairness, and defended by an eloquent attorney, John D. Townsend.

The courtroom was packed for the duration of the case. which lasted for ten days. Many prominent businessmen as well as professional photographers spoke in defence of Mumler, declaring that they had witnessed the entire operation, which had often taken place with cameras, equipment, plates and chemicals supplied by themselves, and were convinced of the genuineness of Mumler's claims.

One of Mumler's most active supporters was an ex-judge, John W. Edmonds, who had received two spirit images (one of his mother) from the photographer and was known as one of the most prominent advocates of spiritualism in America. He had previously written of his beliefs in a small volume entitled: An Appeal to the public on Spiritualism.6 A judge bearing testimony at a trial was considered "astounding." Another witness was David A. Hopkins, a manufacturer of railroad machinery who "impressed everybody with confidence in his honesty and sincerity, as well as intellectual ability." He had been an enthusiastic photographer for 20 years, was not a spiritualist, and visited Mumler thinking all the while that he was a fraud, yet left the studio convinced of the genuineness of Mumler's abilities. Samuel R. Fanswawe, a miniature and portrait painter for 35 years, was "entirely sceptical" but ended up in the witness box in defence of the accused. P.T. Barnum verified that he had witnessed the whole procedure and was satisfied that no trickery had taken place. Prominent photographers who swore to Mumler's innocence included: William Silver, from whom Mumler had bought the studio; William F. Kidney, assistant to W.L. Slee of Poughkeepsie in whose studio Mumler produced "extras" with unfamiliar equipment and chemicals; and Jeremiah Gurney.

Gurney was a particularly impressive witness. He was one of the most respectable photographers of New York, whose work was internationally admired and used as a

touchstone of photographic quality. Gurney testified: “I have been a photographer for twenty-eight years. I witnessed Mumler’s process. I went to scrutinize everything and could find nothing which savoured of fraud or trickery.”7

Between 20 and 30 expert witnesses had been willing to publicly state in a court of law that Mumler was not a fraud. The judge concluded that the prosecution had not proved its case, even though he privately harboured the suspicion that Mumler had resorted to deception. The prisoner was honourably acquitted.

Mumler’s troubles were not over. The gallery had been leased in his absence, his money was gone and he did not have the capital to start another studio. He returned to Boston and began making spirit photographs at his home. His subsequent career was dogged by criticism, accusations of fraud, money problems and ill-health. He died in 1884.
The trial of William H. Mumler in 1869 aroused a storm of controversy in the photographic press. Every conceivable explanation for the extraneous images was offered, except one: that Mumler might be genuine. Mumler’s own reputation was viciously attacked; he was a “charlatan” and his claims “humbug,” who was “swindling” the “gullible” and “sorrowing widows in decorous morning garb” with his cheap trickery. The magazines offered scores of way in which the unscrupulous could duplicate spirit images by photographic means. Only a courageous few correspondents tentatively suggested the possibility that spirits nay indeed be photographed. At every mention of the word “spirit” the correspondence columns were jammed with denunciations, accusations and wild speculations. No other single topic in photography for the remainder of the century spawned such interest or so many words.

In this supercharged atmosphere of antagonism towards spirit photography it is no wonder that serious photographers were reluctant to experiment in this direction, or even to consider that it might be a topic for objective study. As one writer stated: everyone knows that spirits only come out in the dark, hence any photograph of a spirit must be fraudulent.
Such assumptions, however, began to crumble with the arrival of spirit photography in England. Now the critics had to contend with some reputable individuals whom they knew to be expert photographers. It was one thing to dismiss the strange critics of a Boston nobody, a mere novice at photography, and quite another matter to suddenly hurl slander at professionals with national reputations.

The first spirit photograph in England was taken at 177 Palmer Terrace, Holloway Road, London, in the studio of Frederick A. Hudson, on 4 March 1872. The circumstances bear repeating. They were first published in the Spiritualist,8 edited by William H. Harrison who was a well-known figure in photographic circles, often contributing technical articles to the photographic press. He was initially trained as a telegrapher, with a special expertise in submarine electric cables, and contributor of articles to the Engineer. In 1868 he described a prophetic and important idea – a bromide emulsion dry plate. He was editor of the Photographic News, the English

correspondent of Anthony's Photographic Bulletin of New York, and for a time a scientific writer for the Daily Telegraph. His approach to spiritualism was always tinged with a pragmatic, analytical methodology. The writer was Samuel Guppy. He preferred the term "psychic force" to "spiritualism":

To be a spiritualist is generally understood to ascribe the phenomena to the agency of departed souls. To be a psychic force is involves no such commitment. It is quite innocent; it involves no disputes about subjective or objective or unconscious cerebration. You do something and there is the result – you are not pledged to any belief on the subject.9

Guppy had already attempted spirit photographs in his own studio, but only managed to produce a "veiled something." Because the image was inconclusive the subject was put aside, physically if not mentally. On 4 March 1872 Guppy accompanied his wife to Hudson's photographic studio for a set of ordinary cartes-de-visite. When the sitting was over, he told Hudson and his wife (a medium) that he would like to try an experiment. He told his wife to stand behind the background drapery during the portrait session so only Hudson and himself were present.

The picture taken showed a white figure standing behind me, like a person covered with a sheet. My wife was dressed entirely in black. "Try again." Again a curious white figure with a dark part on it, resembling the ace of spades. "Try again."… Again a white sheet-like form ... Now, in these pictures, there is no possibility of deception, except by the collusion of my wife, myself, and Mr Hudson. The figure behind me is that of a person in a white sheet - my wife had on a black dress. Neither she nor I were aware when we went to Mr Hudson's of making the trial. The thought suggested itself to me as a mere experiment. If my wife had had a sheet, and had stepped out from behind, Mr Hudson must have seen her when he took the picture. I mention these things as satisfying myself of the absolute certainty of the figure being another entity than my wife.10

The news of this occurrence was a "sensation." People of social standing such as the Guppys, Hudson and Harrison were not such easy targets as Mumler. The challenge had been made: it was up to the critics to respond, and respond seriously. There is a distinct change of tone in the correspondence and essays which followed this announcement. Editorials which previously offhandedly denounced Mumler as a charlatan and scoundrel were noncommittal, affirming that "there is more in heaven and earth …"; the conclusion was that the subject "requires a little more serious consideration than has yet been given to it … We, therefore, ask that any judgement on a question of such importance shall be suspended until the whole matter shall have been examined with the requisite care …' A change of tune, indeed.

Samuel Guppy was adamant that his results should be taken seriously, and he left the portraits with Hudson for anyone to examine. He had no doubt about the effect of his statement:

As to those who doubt this statement I say – “Wait a bit, and you will see plenty more, well attested.” Another effect will take place - that whereas there are no spirit cartes-de visites until now, because no real spirit likenesses have been produced, imitations will be for sale much more artistic than real.12

Guppy was right on both accounts: “extras” appeared on photographic plates with alarming (to some) frequency, and a vast business in fraudulent spirit pictures was instigated.

The subsequent career of Hudson is illustrative of Guppy’s warnings. Hudson did indeed produce seemingly genuine spirit photographs with increasing frequency, with well known mediums, and under the scrutiny of sceptical investigators. But then again, from time to time he was caught cheating, producing “spirits” by a costumed accomplice or double-exposures. On one occasion he was exposed by William Stainton Moses (1839–92), an ordained minister and Oxford graduate who produced phenomena that seemed psychic in nature. In 1874 Moses discussed his experiences with Edmund Gurney and F.W.H. Myers, two investigators of high academic standing, who were impressed by the seriousness and intelligence of his ideas. An informal association was formed for the investigation of spirit phenomena. Included in this group were Henry Sidgewick, the philosopher, and Arthur Balfour, later to become Prime Minister of England.

Mediums were investigated for eight years – with inconclusive results. The weight of evidence, however, did not support the spiritualist hypothesis although the phenomena were real enough. The group was invited to explain the phenomena by thought-transference (an idea which would have important ramifications later in the century). At last, psychic investigations were placed on a serious level by impartial scholars, leading to the formation of the Society for Psychical Research, with Sidgewick as its first president in 1882. Three years later, a similar association of American scholars was formed, with William James in an active role.

It was difficult for mediums and photographers, like Hudson, to withstand intense scrutiny by such impartial scholars, and only the genuine survived. Hundreds of frauds were exposed and their reputations, to say nothing of their businesses, demolished. A few medium/photographers were constantly exposed to intense scrutiny and their honesty never questioned or their results explained. Others found the ordeal of producing “spirits to order” too severe, and, although capable of achieving “extras” on some occasions, would resort to trickery if necessary, and if they thought they could get away with it. Frederick Hudson seems to belong in the latter category. Now and again he would be caught in a subterfuge; more often than not the evidence would point to the fact that his results were genuine psychic phenomena.

According to Dr Alfred Russel Wallace (1823–1903), the famous naturalist and co-discoverer with Darwin of the principles of evolution, even those who were most

emphatic about fraud had to admit that Hudson produced a large number of genuine spirit photographs. Wallace was anxious to test Hudson himself. In a session with Hudson, and Mrs Guppy as the medium, he expected a picture of his dead mother on the plate. The first exposure produced an ”extra” of a male figure with a short sword! On two subsequent plates, female figures were evident. Both of them represented an unmistakable likeness to his mother, one of which was unlike any photograph taken of her in life. In light of this, and many other experiences, Wallace declared that spiritualism does not require further confirmation. “They are proved, quite as well as any facts are proved in other sciences.”
William Howitt (1792–1879), a prominent author, also investigated Hudson. Howitt is best known in photographic history for his book, joint-authored with his wife Mary, Ruined Abbeys and Castes of Great Britain, which contains pasted-in albumen prints by Francis Bedford, Roger Fenton and others. He obtained “extras” of two deceased sons; existence of one of the sons was completely unknown to Howitts’ friend who accompanied him to the sitting.

A well-known English medium Frank Herne visited Hudson and had his portrait taken, with a table and flowers levitating in the air. Another medium, Georgina Houghton was photographed and the “extra” took the form of a cross over the subject’s head. William H. Harrison sat for Hudson and a draped figure was standing in front of him in the negative, although he saw nothing during the exposure. Within a month of Hudson’s first success in spirit photography, Harrison wrote:

A great many spirit photographs have now been taken by Mr Hudson. In every case, as is his custom, he brings out the negative while still wet and shows it to the sitter before intensifying, so that all the pictures were seen by the sitters themselves within three or four minutes after each plate was removed from the camera.

As Samuel Guppy pointed out, Hudson could “hardly find time to eat,” not only because of the demand of portraits but also because of the demand for information. The photographic press was also flooded with requests for details, denials that spirits would deign to visit a photographer in foggy London, assertions that all spirit pictures could be duplicated by known photographic techniques (which was true but irrelevant, as the spirit photographers claimed), and insistent demands that spiritualism must be accepted as truth.
In view of the almost unanimous criticism and personal attacks surrounding Mumler’s announcement a decade earlier, it is surprising that the overwhelming number of letters to the editors were cool, rational, curious and noncommittal. They wanted facts. The editor of The British Journal of Photography attempted to oblige. He announced that the subject is “fraught with deep importance” and that judgement should be suspended until the whole matter is ”examined with the requisite care”:

... all our trials are to be conducted with our own camera and chemicals and with new plates. When we add that the sensitive plate, or at least the dark frame containing it, shall be under our own eyes from the time the collodion is applied till the appearance of

the image by the action of the developer, we think that it will be admitted that the force of precaution “can no farther go.”14

There was no one better qualified to investigate a photographer than the magazine’s editor, J. Traill Taylor. After a thorough investigation of Hudson and his spirit photography, Taylor testified to the production of supernormal pictures, using his own plates, “and that at no time during the preparation, exposure, or development of the pictures was Mr Hudson within ten feet of the camera or dark room. Appearances of an abnormal kind did certainly appear on several plates, but by whatever means they were caused … the photographer had nothing whatever to do with their production.” Traill Taylor asserted that the “previously-used-plate” theory did not hold up because he bought brand new plates immediately prior to the test and they were never out of his possession. He attested to these facts “as an act of justice to that gentleman (Hudson).” Such a statement took a great deal of moral courage.

No other single person in photography was as respected as John Traill Taylor. He was born in the Orkneys in 1827 and spent his youth in Edinburgh where he studied optics, chemistry and photography, becoming a leading authority in all three field. After a short term on the Scotsman newspaper he began a career in photographic journalism, eventually succeeding to the editorship of The British Journal of Photography in 1864. After fifteen years he emigrated to America where he edited the Photographic Times, returning to his old position in England in 1886. It was during his first editorship of The British Journal of Photography that he began to study spirit photography. At last, so the photographic world believed, the fraudulence of the phenomenon would be exposed. Taylor might have begun his investigation expecting this to be true; he concluded, after exhaustive tests, that the phenomenon was real.15 Writing of the Taylor test of Hudson, Arthur Conan Doyle asserted: “Surely this must be accepted as final.”

Three months after Hudson’s initial success, in 1872, another photographer began to achieve strange results, much to the astonishment and consternation of The Photographic News.17 This magazine had ”uncompromisingly denounced the wicked imposture” of spirit photography, labelling Mumler’s work as ”manifest cheats of the clumsiest character.” It was only a little less severe with Hudson – who at least was a professional photographer and was sponsored by some prominent men – but even his productions were “palpable in their imposture,” of “commonplace character” and “a little examination showed the absurd poorness of the trick by which they were produced.” “All the examples (of spirit photography) … were humiliating illustrations of the gullibility” of the public.
Then John Beattie showed the editors his own productions.

Immediately The Photographic News reversed its attitude. Beattie’s photographs were “amongst the most startling in their history and character we have ever met with.” In this case, the editors were personally acquainted with the photographer, ”an old and thoroughly experienced photographic portraitist, and a gentleman whose sincerity and honesty, as well as ability, no one would dream of doubting.”

Beattie deserved such trust. He was a retired photographer of Clifton who had been in the forefront of the medium for twenty years. He was a lecturer on “mental philosophy, phrenology, and electric science” before entering into partnership in 1850 with Oliver Sarony and his American Daguerreotype Gallery, a travelling portrait studio. Beattie continued as an itinerant photographer before settling in Clifton, where he conducted a high-class business until his retirement in 1869. He was a frequent contributor to photographic journals, both under his own name and under a nom de plume. By the time of Hudson’s leap to fame in 1872, Beattie was enjoying wealth, leisure and an enviable reputation among his peers.

Initially, Beattie considered all spirit photographs to be fraudulently produced but decided to investigate the phenomena for himself. In 1872 he gathered together a few friends, including Dr G. S. Thompson, in the company of a medium, a Mr Butland. They sat seventeen times without result. On the eighteenth attempt “a remarkable form came out quickly on the plate on the application of the developer – a most imperfect resemblance to a human form.”18 They continued the experiments over several weeks. All manner of luminous shapes began to appear – stars, cones, bird-shapes, streamers, crosses and so on. Then a series of exposures on the same occasion revealed a gradual chronological shifting of vague, amorphous forms towards a luminous figure. It was as though there was a progressive development of the spirit-stuff moulding itself into a recognisable form. On the second exposure one of the witnesses, who was in charge of the lens cap, collapsed “in a profound fit.” Earlier he had been laughing at the absurdity of their experiments. When revived he said that the last thing he remembered was the image of his wife standing near the group (She was still alive and he would not calm down until his colleagues had checked that she was well.)

“Afterwards he would not interfere or touch anything.” Beattie concluded:

Spirit photography is to me, if nothing more occurs, a possibility, and the existence of unseen intelligent beings a fact.19

One curious fact which Beattie emphasized is that “in every case these impressions spring out instantly the developer touches the plate, and in full printing force. We have to wait for all other impressions on the same plate coming out.” This same observation was made by many psychic experimenters throughout the subsequent history of the phenomena: that for some inexplicable reason, the “spirit” image develops far more rapidly than the “reality” image.

Beattie’s results produced the usual spate of correspondence, much of it positive and encouraging, some of it personally malicious. Beattie’s replies to his critics were models of carefully considered, constructive suggestions from a mature mind. To a particularly bitter opponent he responded: ”I have not the slightest interest in convincing him or any other man.” He knew that his results were genuine and was

oblivious to doubts from those who would not test the phenomena for themselves. Incidentally, Beattie, apart from his own experiments, investigated the work of Frederick Hudson, providing a fascinating glimpse of the man and his methods.20 Obviously Beattie was a physiognomist:

… Mr Hudson came into the room. I scanned him over from head to foot. He seemed about fifty-six years of age, of a sanguine-nervous temperament, much like a retired actor; he possessed a good frontal brain, but low in all the executive organs, self-esteem, firmness, and the instinct of persistence being all defective – a man you would not take for a deceiver, yet one you would suppose might be easily led.

Beattie then described his experience in the studio and dark room. He checked out the camera, secretly marked the glass plate, left nothing unexamined in the darkroom, and sat in profile so that he could keep an eye on the camera and the other on the background. He was accompanied by a photographer friend as witness, and Hudson was ignorant of his identity. In fact, Hudson seemed not to care, letting Beattie go where he wanted, examine every piece of equipment, and even left him alone in the darkroom. ”Mr Hudson was exceedingly careless as to my doings.” Hardly the attitude of a charlatan. Yet on two of the three plates exposed, figures appeared. The first was a sitting male figure; the second was a standing woman between Beattie and the camera. She was ”clothed with a black skirt, and having a white-coloured, thin, linen drapery, something like a shawl in pattern, upon her shoulders, over which a profuse mass of black hair loosely hung.”

Beattie did not offer any explanation, but was adamant in stating a few ways in which they were not made. They were not made by double-exposure, nor by figures projected in space in any way, nor by mirrors, nor by apparatus in the background, behind it, above it, or below it, nor by any contrivance with the chemicals, the camera or the dark slide.
Commenting on Beattie’s report, The British Journal of Photography stated that he was too thoughtful, skilful, intelligent and therefore “one of the last men in the world to be deceived.” The editor suggested that “There is, after all, really something in spirit photography.”

Now that the main fact was admitted, the question was: by what means are the “extras” formed upon the film.7 The question is still unanswered. Within a few years of the magazine’s insistence that the next step be tackled, spirit photography was still bogged down in the sticky morass of disbelief, doubt and scepticism.

An excuse, if not a reason, for this lack of progress was the sudden and overwhelming influx of imitators, who by resorting to trickery found a ready and convenient way of making money with ”spirit” photography. The techniques were easy enough to discover. The photographic magazines published innumerable how-to-do-it articles which offered a bewildering number of suggestions for making the extras more realistic.

One commentator stated that there were 200 different techniques for creating fraudulent spirit images.
By 1901 phony mediums could obtain all manner of props and accessories from an underground supplier, Ralph E. Sylvestre of Chicago. Sylvestre's catalogue was only sent to professional fake mediums on the strict condition that it was returned with all orders. A copy of this booklet is now in the Harry Price Library at the University of London. Satisfaction was assured as "our effects are being used by nearly all prominent mediums of the entire world." The beginner could buy a "Complete Spiritualistic Seance," or the apparatus for a materialization, which included luminous hands and faces, draperies, or even a full luminous female form and dress, which "appears gradually, floats about the room and disappears." These ingenious contrivances are no different in principle than the equipment supplied to today's professional magicians. The art of illusion has always fascinated the public, especially when practised with skill and verve. Most 19th century mediums and spirit photographers saw themselves in a sub-branch of professional magic. Others, as has been discussed, were genuine psychics who resorted to such devices under pressure, when the "spirits" did not come on command. Only a few found it unnecessary to boost their repertoire with artificial help. In spirit photography, such professional props were largely unnecessary – most practitioners were satisfied with a simple double-exposure, or giving only a part of the exposure time to the "spirit" figure. After the "spirit" has departed the field of view, the exposure was continued. The spirit form would then be transparent on the final print.

Sir David Brewster suggested this technique,21 after seeing a calotype by Hill and Adamson of York Minister (1844) in which a restless boy had moved during the exposure, appearing transparent in the result. There were many similar techniques for recording a luminous and/or partly transparent figure on the photograph. The journals of the 1870s contained a large number of sophisticated, and to the non-specialist virtually undetectable, methods of producing spirits, contributed by some of the most learned and experienced photographers of the age. In one sense, therefore, there is not a scrap of indisputable evidence that any spirit photograph is genuine. But it would be equally naive and fallacious to jump in the opposite direction and assert: therefore a genuine "spirit" photograph does not exist. The accumulated data on the phenomenon, which is vast, suggests a pattern towards the probability that many of these images were implanted on the emulsion in ways that do not conform to the known laws of optics or chemistry, and which lie outside our normal paradigm of "reality."

In the context of the history of photography, however, it hardly matters if spirit images represent a completely and utterly fallacious phenomenon. The fact remains: if we were to compile a list of the topic which most energetically engaged the attention of early photographers, then spirit photography would be near the top.

Notes and References

1. From signed affidavit by Margaret Fox, 11 April 1848. Quoted by Nandor Fodor, Encyclopedia of Psychic Science, p 145.
2. Boston Journal, 23 November 1904.
3. The Personal Experiences of William H. Mumler in Spirit-Photography, Boston: Colby and Rich, 1875, pp. 3-4.
4. Ibid, p. 5
5. Ibid, pp. 9–11.
6. John W. Edmonds, An Appeal to the Public on Spiritualism, New York: Partridge and Brittan, 1853.
7. The Photographic News, 11 June 1869, p. 285.
8. Spiritualist, 15 March 1872.
9. Quoted in The British Journal of Photography, 28 March 1872, p 113.
10. Ibid.
11. Editorial, The British Journal of Photography, 3 May 1872, p. 204.
12. The British Journal of Photography, 28 March 1872, p. 143.
13. The British Journal of Photography, 12 April 1872, p. 177.
14. The British Journal of Photography, 3 May 1872, p. 204.
15. The British Journal of Photography, 11 July 1873.
16. Arthur Conan Doyle, The History of Spiritualism, Vol. 11, p. 135.
17. "Spirit Photographs – Startling Results," The Photographic News, 28 June 1872, p. 307.
18. John Beattie, "A Description of Remarkable Experiments in Photography," The British Journal of Photography, 28 June 1872, p. 303. A similar account was published in The Photographic News, 28 June 1872, p. 307.
19. Ibid.
20. John Beattle, "Spirit Photography," The British Journal of Photography, 11 July 1873, pp. 325–326.
21. Sir David Brewster, "On the methods of taking Transparent Photographs of Opake Objects," The Photographic Journal, 15 August 1866, p. 89.