BOOKS: HISTORY

Entrancing Influences

Alan Gauld

Historical accounts of the 19th century's mesmeric movement by psychologists and psychiatrists tend to be brief and misleading. Most assimilate mesmerism, which supposedly involved a direct physiological influence (for example, through the "mesmeric passes") into hypnosis, often thought of as a product of "mental suggestion." But such an assumption is overly simplified and, in view of current arguments over the nature of hypnosis, certainly not very enlightening. In the last two decades, however, a different approach has been opened up by historians: Skirting questions about the underlying nature of mesmeric phenomena, they have used the mesmeric movement to reflect upon and highlight aspects of the social, cultural, and scientific histories of particular periods.

Mesmerized
Powers of Mind in Victorian Britain
by Alison Winter
University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1998. 478 pp. $30.00, £23.95. ISBN 0-226-90219-6.

Alison Winter, a historian at the California Institute of Technology, writes in this tradition. Her topic is British mesmerism in the mid-19th century. Mesmerism came late to Britain. It made little impact there until the late 1830s, then extensively pervaded the national consciousness over the next couple of decades. In this book, Winter examines a variety of important mesmeric episodes and personalities and situates them within a wide range of historical issues.

The most important of these issues bears upon public attitudes towards medicine and science. At the time, the public, understandably, held the medical profession in low esteem. Treatments were often unpleasant and their outcomes doubtfully effective. Reform was strongly advocated by some influential practitioners, and just as strongly resisted by others. Into these troubled waters mesmerism dropped as a catalyst, precipitating fierce arguments between medical men and laymen, and among different groups of medical reformers. A minority of the reformers, headed by John Elliotson (professor of medicine at University College, London), welcomed mesmerism as a powerful theoretical tool; while a majority, with Thomas Wakley (editor of the *Lancet*) among the most vocal, opposed it as dangerous charlatanry.

The controversies came to a head over the surprisingly numerous surgical operations carried out under mesmeric anesthesia, especially those reported from India by James Esdaile. Many persons, not all credulous, were convinced by Esdaile's accounts. Thus, the discovery of ether anesthesia in 1846 was hailed with delight by orthodox medicine in part because it upstaged the mesmerists. (The shortcomings that ether shared with mesmerism, such as uncertainty of action, were conveniently overlooked, as was its additional disadvantage of frequently being fatal.) As Winter perceptively remarks, these controversies were not simple duels between the establishment and the fringe. What was at stake was the construction of mesmerism as the fringe.

Revised record. The triumph of ether over mesmeric anesthesia was aided by William Morton's 1846 experiment. But this celebratory painting from the 1880s ignores the patient's moaning and moving under the knife and the uproar described by the original witnesses.

Following Esdaile's reports and the remarkable public and private performances of travelling "electrobiologists," some medical men and physiologists (notably the eminent W. B. Carpenter) came to realize that the alleged phenomena of mesmerism would best be handled not by dismissal or invective, but by rational scientific explanation. Their explanations involved such ideas as "cerebral reflex" and "non-volitional ideo-motor action." The same processes were thought to explain table-turning (when a table "under the hands of several 'operators' began to move without being pushed"), for which there had been a craze in the early 1850s. Writers such as Thomas Henry Huxley, Henry Maudsley, and Herbert Spencer applied these concepts to education, and argued that "the building of one's mental reflex apparatus was the key to proper mental functioning," which included the acceptance of scientific authority over such matters as mesmerism. Winter believes that these writers may have influenced the "official" philosophy of scientific education developed in the 1860s and 1870s.

Clergymen, too, felt that mesmerism touched on their professional concerns. Some detected a whiff of sulfur about it, others thought it could have a role in pastoral care, still others argued that mesmeric clairvoyance undermined philosophical materialism (of which Elliotson was a notorious supporter). Within the broad arena of mesmerism a variety of other controversial issues also arose, including issues of class and the subordination of the poor, of social reform and the subordination of the reformed, of medical authority and the subordination of the patient, and of gender and the subordination of women. (The well-known writer Harriet Martineau, profoundly convinced of the importance of mesmerism, refused to be suppressed or subordinated either as a patient or as a woman.) These can, perhaps, be scrutinized more effectively now than at the time.

The many threads of this book are complexly related and sometimes obscured. Although certain of the author's interpretations will probably strike some readers as far-fetched, it would be inappropriate to debate particular points of minor importance. *Mesmerized* is a work of considerable scholarship and acumen, written by an author with an unrivaled knowledge of Victorian mesmerism and a wide acquaintance with Victorian Britain. Above all, Winter has disinterred and illuminatingly utilized a number of little-known archival collections, which considerably enhance the value of her book. In the future, anyone approaching the history of mesmerism, from whatever point of view, will need a copy at hand.

The author is in the School of Psychology, University of Nottingham, Nottingham NG7 2RD, UK.

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