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Review

SERENA KESHAVJEE (ed.), *The Art of Ectoplasm: Encounters with Winnipeg's Ghost Photographs*

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The Art of Ectoplasm: Encounters with Winnipeg's Ghost Photographs. Serena Keshavjee, editor. Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 2023. 318 pp. 9781772840377

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For someone with only the most peripheral knowledge of the Hamilton Family Fonds, the perceptive, interdisciplinary prism of this book was a fortunate introduction. Editor Serena Keshavjee has brought together a diverse group of academics and archivists who, in a series of nine essays, collectively provide context and a critical gaze that forces us to look carefully at what this fonds, held at the University of Manitoba Archives & Special Collections (UMASC), helps to document. As such, this book should be of considerable interest to a wide audience. For archivists specifically, it also provides a case study in acquisition and outreach.

Thomas Glendenning (T.G.) Hamilton and his wife Lillian were a professional middle-class couple living in Winnipeg at the turn of the 20th century and during its early decades. T.G. was a doctor, Lillian was a nurse, and their surviving offspring were all university educated (pp. 123–27). The Hamilton Family Fonds is extensive and consists of glass plate negatives and slides; photographs; albums; and various textual records including minutes, correspondence, and ephemera (p. 168). It reflects their interest and research in various aspects of psychic phenomenon: “rappings, clairvoyance, trance states and trance charts, telekinesis, wax molds, bell-ringing.”¹ Among this material are photographs and minutes from séances held in the Hamilton home.

1 Canadian Archival Information Network, “Fonds Mss14, Pc 12, Tc 70 (A.79-21, A.79-41, A.79-52, A.79-56, A.79-65, A.80-08, A.80-25, A.81-09, A.86-56, A12-109) – Hamilton Family Fonds,” ArchivesCanada.ca, accessed January 20, 2024, <https://archivescanada.accesstomemory.ca/hamilton-family-fonds-2>.

T.G. Hamilton, who set up the cameras and plates, “released the flash, took and printed almost every photograph” (p. 53) during these events, and described the resulting images as “monstrously extraordinary” (p. 227); more recently, they have been called “jaw-dropping” (p. 167). Samples of these images and album pages with notes have been beautifully reproduced throughout the book. For first-time viewers, they are, at the very least, surprising and unexpected.

These photographs elicited contradictory reactions in editor Serena Keshavjee, who called them “simultaneously uncanny and compelling, silly and serious,” yet nevertheless, “one of the most important photographic archives in Canada” (p. 5). That she came to know of their existence at all might appear serendipitous; while she was giving a talk on her PhD research in 1997 at the University of Manitoba, “someone casually mentioned that there were ‘ghost’ photographs at UMASC taken by a local family physician” (p. 5). What ultimately resulted was *The Art of Ectoplasm*, which mainly explores the age in which the Hamiltons lived; their beliefs and actions, as well as those of others during that period; and how those resonate today.

These essays consider the impact of the 1919 pandemic on Winnipeg and provide a close, empathetic telling of its impact on one family. They explore the development of scientific theory and accepted practices and concepts within biology, evolution, and psychology, together with the influence of people from Arthur Conan Doyle and Harry Houdini to Nobel Prize winner Charles Richet and philosopher Henri Bergson. An essay that reconsiders the Hamiltons’ work by viewing it in terms of gender was insightful, and biographies of all the participants in the Hamilton séances similarly added to an understanding not only of the characters and personalities involved but also of the underlying issue of economic disparities among them (as well as the economic hardship Lillian Hamilton endured following the death of her husband). While the Hamilton fonds may be about death, it is also fundamentally about hope, belief, and systems of belief – particularly Protestant Christianity. Spiritualism, “rampant following the tragedy of World War I” (p. 46), was emphatically rejected by the Hamiltons, but others prominent at the time, including Arthur Conan Doyle and his wife Jean Leckie, were adherents (p. 47). This aspect, too, is mentioned in these essays.

Popular culture, including the influence of film and advertising on modern views, is discussed, as is Winnipeg’s transition from the Chicago of the North to Weird Winnipeg. The chapter by KC Adams counterbalances the predominant

settler perspectives of the Hamilton seance participants. Adams give us an Indigenous definition of spirit within a discussion of the “privileged position behind” the camera (p. 217). She considers “representing spirit in photography in a way that honoured my culture and did not cheapen or pan it” (p. 219), and does so (in part) through the telling of “an ancient burial of a young nehiyaw woman near Split Lake, Manitoba” (p. 219). This short chapter is the most moving, and among the most thought-provoking, in the book. In the final essay of the volume, Serena Kashavjee weaves both scientific and artistic theory into a remarkable visual history, situating the Hamilton photographs within Modernist art and taking us from James Tissot and Auguste Rodin to Guy Maddin and current artists such as Teresa Burrows and Erika DeFreitas, whose work has been inspired in part by the Hamilton photographs. These varied and fascinating discussions take as their starting point a single archival fonds.

All the material from the Hamilton research had remained in the family’s possession (p. 119) until the first accrual of this fonds was donated in 1979, during the tenure of Richard Bennett, just a year after the University of Manitoba Archives was established. As he recounted later to archivist Brian Hubner, Bennett was by no means certain the Hamilton Family Fonds would be used immediately – or even for years (p. 184).

It had been a well-known collection in its day: through a series of lectures, conference presentations, and exhibitions, T.G. Hamilton had acquired an international reputation, and the images he had developed in his darkroom had been viewed by many worldwide. His death and the deaths of other prominent advocates, followed by a second world war, led to a faltering of interest in this subject (p. 67). Following his acquisition of the fonds, Richard Bennett gave “two high-profile radio interviews” (p. 184), and Shelley Sweeney subsequently ensured that images from the fonds were first posted, in 2001, to the UMASC website and then digitized more extensively in 2006. The Archives then created a popular promotional YouTube video in 2008.² Walter Meyer zu Erpen’s thorough and careful research in the early 1990s – and his subsequent articles, conference presentations, and publications, some in collaboration with archivist Shelley Sweeney – have not only highlighted the potential of the Hamilton Family Fonds for new audiences but have also assisted with bringing other

2 Manitobaclays, “T.G. Hamilton’s Photos of Ectoplasm,” YouTube video, 4:06, February 27, 2008, <https://youtu.be/W0HncGNBCqY?feature=shared>.

collections to the attention of UMASC. The Archives have, to date, acquired 50 relevant and related fonds, a rare book collection, and a named research grant at UMASC, all significantly enhancing the potential for further research.³

Archivists have a strong interest in the impacts of our holdings. Margaret Atwood's *Alias Grace* has often been cited as an example of an impactful use of archival materials, as have numerous instances where archival records were essential to civic, provincial, or federal undertakings. Certainly, numerous academic publications and theses have relied on our holdings. What distinguishes this volume is the extent to which it not only relates so clearly to the Hamilton Family Fonds but also recognizes the work of archivists as an essential element – not simply by including an acknowledgement statement but also by recognizing archivists as necessary participants from the beginning.

Editor Serena Keshavjee noted that “if something isn't catalogued, it might as well not exist” (p. 5). This is why the archival community put so much effort into establishing ArchivesCanada – arguably one of our primary research tools, and, if maintained and expanded, potentially one of our best. That the Hamilton Family Fonds might be considered “controversial” (p. 177) hindered neither its acquisition nor, happily, its subsequent promotion. An essential feature of the latter was the careful sympathy, rather than ridicule (p. 169), with which the fonds was viewed. *The Art of Ectoplasm*, an intelligent exploration of context and a reflection of academic imagination and study, has been one of the many significant results and is surely destined to become a significant work of outreach itself.⁴

3 See University of Manitoba Libraries, “Archival Collections: Psychical Research and Spiritualism Collections,” University of Manitoba, July 19, 2023, <https://libguides.lib.umanitoba.ca/archives/archivalcollections/psychicalspiritualism>.

4 Keshavjee has recently curated an exhibition, “The Undead Archive: 100 Years of Photographing Ghosts,” which is also reviewed in this issue of *Archivaria*.