



The Left Atrium

The vulgar pushing scions of a new science

Mesmerized: powers of mind in Victorian Britain

Alison Winter

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Viewed in the rearview mirror of history, Victorian Britain looks as bleak a house as there could be. Yet in *Mesmerized: Powers of Mind in Victorian Britain*, Alison Winter draws back the heavy curtains to reveal a vortex of change that remodelled human interaction and social power. An assistant professor of history at the California Institute of Technology, Winter takes mesmerism from the lunatic fringes of society and places it at the epicentre of a cultural earthquake, where, she argues, it exerted a deeply subversive and seductive appeal. People of intelligence and good breeding as well as “that vulgar pushing woman,” as Robert Browning described Fanny Trollope, were drawn to the animal-eyed followers of Dr. Franz Anton Mesmer, whose technique for controlling another’s mind and body reached Britain in the 1830s. According to Mesmer, an invisible “vital principle” linked cosmic phenomena with life on earth. By spreading this force evenly over the subject’s body, a magnetizer could cure physical and mental disease.

When mesmerism arrived in England it landed in the middle of a philosophical debate about what constituted “science.” This debate is in many ways familiar to us, given modern controversies over levels of evidence and alternative treatments. In Victorian England there was no medical orthodoxy to police what doctors did. The line between quack and professor of medicine was very thin indeed. Experiments took the form of private or public demonstrations. However, as the century wore on, reforms in education and laboratory investigation left less room for the type of investigation Mesmer’s devotees needed. After the Medical Regulation

Act of 1858, medicine became increasingly regulated. What we now consider the basic sciences of physiology, chemistry, biology and physics were just beginning to come into their own, emerging from the less defined field of natural philosophy with its metaphysical roots. One of the perplexing epistemological questions facing Victorian scientists was the role of the “self” in descriptions of reality. Charles Babbage’s “thinking machines” appeared to offer a way to interpret nature without human bias. But how could nature be “known” in any branch of science when the recording instrument — the human brain and mind — was the thing under study?

Amid this scientific debate, mesmerism became the *cause célèbre* of social reform. The observation that people shared, regardless of their colour, the same psychic abilities and experiences pointed to common bonds that transcended race. In Winter’s view, mesmerism wasn’t an innocent parlour game; it was a potent symbol of a political and scientific *Zeitgeist* that threatened to shake the social order. The writer Fanny Trollope, mother of the more famous Victorian novelist Anthony Trollope, is best remembered for her fictional diatribes against the abuse of working children in England’s industrial north. In one episode she described how during a mesmeric seance a factory owner is haunted by the ghosts of child

labourers he worked to death; thus she captured the convergence of a revolution in science with an emerging, vocal working class seeking revenge.

Mesmerism caught on partly because it could be conducted by anyone who had acquired the technique. Travelling lecturers demonstrated the power of animal magnetism to public audiences and in private parlours. Primarily involving female subjects who were put in a trance by the mesmeric “pass” of hands along the body, these sessions often evoked paranormal phenomena, the suspension of pain and psychic clairvoyance.

Mesmerists claimed to diagnose and treat disease. A hospital ward was set up at University College Hospital in London where experiments were conducted to investigate the healing effects of mesmerism. Public displays of the surgical removal of limbs and tumours in the pre-anesthetic era lent powerful evidence of the metaphysical forces at work. These in turn led to further research in pain and

the subsequent development of anesthetics such as ether.

Although some physicians took up mesmerism, it was primarily lay practitioners who popularized it. It required no special education, and anyone with the talent could

mesmerize a patient. This challenged many of the reforms that doctors were introducing. But this medical reform, including the physical examination of the patient, threatened Victorian Britain’s habits and sensibilities. Patients were unused to being poked and prodded while naked. Medical reform and the fervour of the hygiene movement diminished privacy and personal freedom. Medical manuals called for the



Art Explosion

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purchase of special equipment for the sickroom, changing a patient's bedroom into a barren, hospital-style ward. In some ways the current popularity of home care is a return to an era of patient control over the care environment. Another effect of medical reforms was the licensing and regulation of medical practitioners; before this, just about anyone could treat sick people. Medicine, after all, didn't have a great success rate.

Medical reforms such as these made mesmerism seem conservative. Its mode of diagnosis and treatment was, to many, "more proper" than hospital practice. Now that invasive medicine is the standard for the investigation and treatment of many conditions, it can be hard for today's physicians to appreciate how auscultation and percussion were cultural shocks to the Victorian patient. The professionalization of medicine required patients to learn new ways of being sick. Winter argues that mesmerism was a countercurrent to these changes in medical practice, one that empowered patients — especially several prominent women such as Ada Lovelace, Elizabeth Barrett and Harriet Martineau, who publicized their cures.

Winter's book will appeal to physicians interested in the history of medicine and to anyone practising clinical hypnosis. *Mesmerized* is an entertaining exploration of a neglected subject, even if in the end it reads like a feverishly overwritten doctoral thesis.

Peter Vaughan, MD, MPH

Dr. Vaughan is Secretary General of the CMA.

[Y]ou cannot contest the inestimable benefit which I shall confer on all mankind to the last generation, by ... ascertaining the secret of the magnet which, if at all possible, can only be effected by an undertaking such as mine.

Learn from me, if not by my precepts, at least by my example, how dangerous is the acquirement of knowledge, and how much happier that man is who believes his native town to be the world, than he who aspires to become greater than his nature will allow.

Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein, or, The Modern Prometheus* (1831 edition)

Two thousand words



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Men's and women's sitting rooms, Perley Home for Incurables, Ottawa, January 1904