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# Repicturing the Past

## Jane Stewart Smith, Spiritualism and Psychical History

doi.org/10.30664/ar.162600



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Seeking to establish "psychical history" as a category of Victorian occult science, this paper explores the consequences that emerge when belief in spirit phenomena converges on the historical imagination. To do so, a study of the Bygone Days watercolour series by Scottish Spiritualist and artist, Jane Stewart Smith (1839–1925), explores the shifting layers of meaning in her paintings by looking at three important inter-related aspects of her career: her artistic efforts to picture Edinburgh's old town, her belief in Spiritualism and her interests as a psychical investigator. Rather than viewing these watercolours as simply illustrating the social reality of the nineteenth-century old town, this paper explores the ways in which Smith was deeply concerned with esoterically perceiving and engaging history. In playing with the boundaries of history and the present, the seen and the unseen, Smith's images engage questions about how to connect with the past and reveal complex relations between her art-making, spirituality and historical inclinations. Establishing psychical history as an important category provides the theoretical framework for the discussion of Smith's idiosyncratic worldview in relation to the occultural context of scientific ideas originating from the field of psychical research. I argue Smith's deepening esoteric interests in psychical history inspired her own endeavours at both history-writing later in her career as a form of generative knowledge production and repicturing her series not only as illustrative material but also as simulations of clairvoyant insights.

### Introduction

A series of watercolour paintings by the Scottish artist, Jane Stewart Smith (1839–1925), sit unnoticed, dispersed between the stores of Edinburgh city's art collection and the archives of Historic Environment Scotland. Known today as the Bygone Days series, these overlooked paintings contain shifting layers of meaning and reveal a surprising yet fascinating response to esoteric interests in Spiritualism, psychical research and the historical imagination.

We are now at a stage where women artists are rightly recognised as integral proponents of esoteric movements, and that esotericism has had a profound impact on wider culture, including the developments of modern art. Alex Owen has demonstrated how in the nineteenth century Spiritualism gave women a platform to converse on metaphysical and scientific matters, while Spiritualists also perceived women in the context of typical Victorian gender norms, in which women were thought to be suited to the role of medium because of their sensitivity and receptivity (1989, 4–5). Recent exhibitions have highlighted the connection between women, esotericism and art to a broader public such

as Georgiana Houghton: Spirit Drawings (2016) at the Courtauld Gallery and Hilma af Klint: Paintings for the Future (2018–2019) at the Guggenheim Museum, to name only two examples. As the accompanying articles in this special edition demonstrate, women artists were deeply engaged with esotericism to inform their art-making and their artistic expression contributed to esoteric currents of their day. What I seek to do here is expand the conversation about women artists' contributions in a turn-of-the-century context, by looking more closely at the history of ideas and intellectual discourses that informed their art.

This concerns an artist who has not received attention in previous scholarship, and whose esotericism is not necessarily immediately evident. Jane Stewart Smith is a little-known artist who was based in Edinburgh in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. She exhibited landscape paintings at the Royal Scottish Academy's annual exhibitions in the 1860s and 1870s, many of which were drawn from the Bygone Days series. As a Spiritualist in Edinburgh, Smith was a member of a community who practised in private. It is unclear when exactly she first embraced Modern Spiritualism but she was fully engaged by the mid 1870s.[1] Her earliest confirmed involvement with the movement was reported in 1875 in the Spiritualist newspaper, *The Medium and Daybreak*, as the hostess for American Spiritualist, medium, trance lecturer and future co-founder of the National Spiritualist Association of Churches, Cora L. V. Tappan (1840–1923), when she visited the city on a propaganda tour (Foot 2023, 60). In Tappan's account of the tour, she alluded to Smith's watercolour series, remarking she was "entertained by a lady, who is an artist, and has painted nearly every historical and picturesque place in Edinburgh" (Tappan 1875, 516).

It is the afterlife of the Bygone Days series that forms the focus of the following discussion and analysis. The paintings initially emerged in the 1860s as an artistic project that sought to depict Edinburgh's old town, an area in the historic heart of Scotland's capital city, as a response to the changing city landscape. Smith's preoccupation with the old town coincided with a period of increased artistic interest in the city when a significant civil improvement scheme was altering the fabric of the townscape to address poverty and sanitation problems. As the old architecture was demolished to make way for modern improvements, historical landmarks and picturesque features became a cultural fixation. Smith, like fellow artists at this time, captured an Edinburgh that was disappearing. Her watercolours depict the many narrow streets (known locally as closes, wynds and rows) and captured the daily lives of the townsfolk. These paintings show that Smith had a tendency towards historicity from an early stage in her artistic career, which would be sustained throughout her life.

The initial purpose of these paintings—intended to record and document the old town—is of less interest here. Although it is possible Smith may have already held esoteric interests at the point of their inception, these interests only become clear when they are united in a text-image relationship. This concerns their afterlives and the significance

1 Unfortunately, Jane Stewart Smith's personal archive, diaries and correspondence have not survived.

of their repurposing in which they repicture the past through a Spiritualist framing of psychical history. Smith's inclination and sensitivities towards historical engagements were reinvigorated in the 1890s and 1920s when she researched, wrote and published two history books focused on Edinburgh's past: *The Grange of St Giles* (1898) and *Historic Stones and Stories of Bygone Edinburgh* (1924). Her watercolours were repurposed as illustrations for these books, especially the latter, which gave the title to the series by which they are known today. In what follows, I argue that the images were not merely utilised as illustrative material but also represent Smith's idiosyncratic perception of seeing into the past when she embraced Spiritualism and developed an interest in psychical research. Spiritualism's idealisation and appropriation of science established an occultural context from which "psychical history" emerged as a peculiar concept, and which I seek to categorise as another branch of nineteenth-century psychical research. In order to understand the Bygone Days series, it is therefore necessary to first understand how Smith arrived at her interests in psychical history and examine the occultural context of scientific theories that informed this branch of psychical research.

## A clairvoyant vision

On 26 January 1891, Jane Stewart Smith visited the Grange House in the south of Edinburgh— the historic home of the Dick-Lauder family. Her visitation initiated a clairvoyant vision of episodes from the seventeenth-century, as she explained:

> On returning from the Grange House to-day I distinctly saw, or dreamed that I saw, a gentleman dressed in black velvet of the King Charles period, with lace and ruffles and a short cloak. He held a large plumed hat in his hand as he stepped into an oak panelled room. His face was haggard and worried-looking, but his whole bearing had a noble appearance. […] A lady then came hurriedly forward to meet him, and, throwing her arms round his neck, she laid her face on his shoulder and wept. […] The scene suddenly changed to another room, in which the same lady met a younger one, clad in lighter clothing, with an anxious frightened look on her face. I noticed this lady's hair was much darker and most picturesquely arranged. The two forms entered an upper room very hurriedly, and appeared to speak to a young man, who rose from a reclining position on a kind of settle or low couch. His costume was of the same period, but of a brownish-coloured cloth, and as he was in semi-deshabille, he had neither coat nor ruffles on. His clothes were of the finest texture, and his linen superlatively white. The three stood close together for an instant, evidently speaking in a whisper, then it seemed as if they were startled by some unwelcome sound, and were listening breathlessly. Suddenly the young man stooped down and drew a rapier from beneath a heap of clothing, and they all quickly disappeared through another door. Instantly another tableau presented itself I felt as though it was still at the Grange House, but in an upper corridor, where a man suddenly appeared dressed in the Cromwell costume,

> with a large dark cloak wrapped about him, top-boots, and grey hat. His hand was on the hilt of his sword, and he moved stealthily along the passage on tiptoe, bending down and prying into every corner. He entered the long room which the other forms had just vacated, still peering round about him, with a sinister expression on his face, as though seeking some Royalist foe. After a fruitless search he also passed hurriedly out, disappearing in darkness, which remained for a few seconds. (Smith 1898, xii)

Smith claimed she was unable "to account for these strange visions, knowing at that time absolutely nothing of the history of the Grange House" (Smith 1898, xiii). This *not-knowing* was crucial as a point of initiation into the history and the subsequent intellectualisation of the vision that would transform into *knowing*—a pursuit and attainment of historical knowledge. As Smith went on to explain:

> The suddenness and the consecutiveness of the tableaux I distinctly felt there must be an underlying meaning somewhere, which it might be interesting to unravel. But what it all had to do with the Grange House puzzled me greatly to know, and that was exactly what I resolved to find out. (Smith 1898, xiii)

Feeling "a strong desire to find an elucidation or corroboration" (Smith 1898, xi), she carried out an investigation of the vision through historical research. Her investigation led her to archival sources that revealed she had seen the downfall of Sir William Dick of Braid (1580–1655), a wealthy landowner, banker and merchant, who had lost his fortune when his royalist loyalties made him the target of Oliver Cromwell's troops during the Wars of the Three Kingdoms.

The whole experience prompted Smith to write *The Grange of St Giles*, which covers several centuries of the two strands of the Dick-Lauder family history and the history of the Grange House. Epistemic certainties also arose from this experience—from vision, investigation, to source confirmation. In other words, her vision was generative, giving rise to new knowledge. Adopting Spiritualist tendencies to seek evidence to support their experiences prompted Smith to undertake further investigation as a psychical researcher in the guise of a historian.

## Psychical research: spiritualism and science

Prompted by her clairvoyant episode to investigate the veracity of her vision of Grange House, Smith undertook a period of research into the history of the building and its residents. Her visionary insights into the past and subsequent investigation can be considered as participation in psychical research—a new field of study in the nineteenth century which sought to examine and explain esoteric and occult phenomena.

Psychical research was considered an intellectual discipline by Spiritualists and scientists alike. Although it is now frequently dismissed as a pseudoscience, psychical research is recognised as an important force in shaping modern scientific theories, and its influence has been traced in philosophical and psychological thought. With the emergence of positivism

in the nineteenth century came a growing confidence that science would be able to measure, calculate, explain and rationalise all aspects of the universe. The positivist discourse of science tightened the boundaries of what could be considered scientific fact, of what might constitute scientific proof, and who could be considered to speak authoritatively about scientific truth (Porter 2005, 4). Rather than see positivism as potentially problematic, many esotericists embraced the latest developments in modern science, recognising its potential to articulate their experiences and confirm, indeed verify, their claims and convictions. Spiritualists, for example, argued that spirits were a natural but as yet unexplained part of the universe and invited scientists into their séances, seeing their authority and ability to accurately test, and hopefully explain, the existence of spirits and spiritual phenomena, just as science could explain the rest of the world.

In Britain, the Society for Psychical Research (SPR) was founded in 1882, consisting of believers and sceptics, the open-minded and undecided.[2] Members set out to make supposedly cutting-edge explorations and endeavoured to make scientific discoveries by thorough investigation (Oppenheimer 1985, 3). In doing so, psychical research was presented as an empirical science and became the space where movements such as Spiritualism built relationships with scientific theories. Victorian scientists who affiliated with psychical research sought to investigate spiritual and mediumistic phenomena associated with Spiritualism in the name of empirical science. Although what they observed was sometimes controversial and not always convincing, their theories and conclusions resulted in influential concepts such as "ectoplasm", "cosmic consciousness", "electromagnetic affectivity", "etheric bodies", "telepathy" and "the subliminal self", which informed developments in the fields of psychology, physiology, chemistry and physics. In turn, Spiritualists adopted the central and defining characteristics of nineteenth-century scientific positivism: the ideology that science represented the pre-eminent path to "truth". This acceptance meant that Spiritualist truth-claims must be in accord with science. As Jennifer Porter has articulated, throughout the latter half of the nineteenth century "the discourse of science became the authorative discourse for Spiritualists. This gradually resulted in a shift in emphasis from claims to scientific verifiability for Spiritualist experiences […] to the adoption of scientific language and symbols as a means of articulation or expression of spiritualist experience" (Porter 2005, 5). The relationship, therefore, between science, spiritualism and psychical research is now understood to have been significant as a profoundly influential cultural constant in late Victorian and Edwardian culture (e.g. Asprem 2014; Noakes 2019; McCorristine 2010, 104).

2 Smith would have been familiar with the relationship between Spiritualism and psychical research. Towards the end of the nineteenth century, psychical research legitimised engagements with, and facilitated an increase in the popularity of, Spiritualism in Scotland. Smith herself had connections with Barbara and James Hewatt Mackenzie, founders of the British College of Psychic Science in London, an institute dedicated to psychical research while sympathetic to mediumship (Foot 2023, 119–35).

## Psychical history

Psychical research was important for Victorian knowledge production. The chemist and physicist, William Crookes (1832–1919), who held the office of president of SPR from 1896 to 1899, asserted in his inaugural presidential address that this field of investigation had much to offer, declaring "though [it is] still in a purely nascent stage, seems to me at least as important as any other science whatever. Psychical science, as we here try to pursue it, is the embryo of something which in time may dominate the whole world of thought" (Crookes 1897, 338). Despite many of the theories that came out of psychical research being later disproved and dismissed as inaccurate, for contemporaries it was nonetheless considered a serious enquiry and considered capable of making new exciting discoveries which would inform future ways of thinking.

Although the sciences are frequently discussed in this regard, they account for only one branch of psychical research's complex range of inquiry, investigation and interests. There is another branch of psychical research that can be categorised in order to define the investigative processes involved in explaining Spiritualism's claims to access knowledge of the past and gain historical insights. Psychical research needs to be understood as having a broader scope of influence on the intellectual disciplines of the nineteenth century than has previously been acknowledged.[3] My proposal to categorise "psychical history" as a branch of psychical research responds to Christine Ferguson and Efram Sera-Shriar's call to fully appreciate and wholistically understand the diverse experiences of Victorians and their relationship to science and Spiritualism, noting "there is no singular experience with these cultural phenomena" and that "it is important to push beyond the conventional narrative and explore its 'multiple contextualisations'" and the "multi-layered manifestations" of Spiritualism and science (2022, 5–6).

Although previous scholarship has firmly established the connections between Spiritualism and Victorian science, it has overlooked the wider impact of psychical research on other intellectual disciplines during this same period, such as the study of history. When Spiritualists claimed that their spirit-mediums could contact the spirits of the past they offered a compelling notion: the opportunity for history to speak directly to us. Investigators sought information about the past in séances and Spiritualists offered mediumistic access to history as an alternative form of Victorian knowledge production. That is to say, as an epistemological strategy visions of the past and dialogue with historical personalities were considered generative pathways to new knowledge, prompting interest in and investigation of historical details, events, episodes and individuals. As Smith's description of the Grange House vision demonstrates, the visual details that are outlined attest to an interest in fashions and material objects that seemed pertinent of the time period to which Smith had become a clairvoyant witness. Recognising "psychical history" as the intersection between Spiritualism and psychical research's engagement with, and

3 For the relationship between psychical research and anthropology, see Efram Sera-Shriar's *Psychic Investigators: Anthropology, Modern Spiritualism, and Credible Witnessing in the Late Victorian Age*, 2022.

study of, the past enables us to think about Smith's paintings and writings in an alternative framework of understanding.[4]

This was an open-minded form of investigation similar to those scientists studying other types of phenomena in séances to explain how invisible forces may be at work. The level of commitment and conviction of the investigator in such scenarios would differ between individuals—some would believe what they saw while others remained unconvinced. In a similar manner, psychical historians did not necessarily come away from their encounters with Spiritualism believing what they experienced but it prompted new modes of thinking that informed their approaches to the study of history. In this sense psychical history provided new epistemological strategies in both psychical research and historical research.

If clairvoyant visions or details provided by spirit messages gave psychical historians "clues" about the past, the seeking out of empirical evidence to authenticate their accuracy prompted a process of positivist historical research.[5] Researching of such evidence could either support the phenomena or discount it. In Smith's case at the Grange House, her vision gave her individuals, sequences of a narrative and a time period to investigate, and her subsequent research set out to identify and explain the scene that had allegedly unfolded before her. That she claimed she had found the objective documentation—the coveted evidence—in Edinburgh's Signet Library archives, which verified the information in the vision, was enough for her to be convinced that psychical history was a legitimate exercise and her clairvoyant insight into the past was "true".[6]

## The intellectual genealogy of psychical history

There are several contributing factors to the occultural context in which ideas about psychical history emerged and were formulated. Here I use Christopher Partridge's concept of occulture to explain how esoteric and occult ideas permeate the eve-

4 Psychical history is not proposed here as a form of legitimate study but presented as a branch of psychical research which, I argue, had a cultural impact in a similar vein to other branches of this field of Victorian science. It is beyond the scope of this essay to explore and scrutinise the issues and problems regarding the role of intuition, subjectivity and *a posteriori* knowledge in the enquiry of psychical history. Nor is there space here to consider turn-of-the-century debates about the value of the historical imagination and how the aforementioned aspects factor into the positivist ideals of objectivity and accuracy among both orthodox historians and those pursuing heterodox methods of enquiry.

5 Incidentally, historical positivism emerged at the same time as empirical science was engaging with psychical research. In Scotland, the Scottish History Society was founded in 1886 to promote the scholarly study and research of the history of Scotland. The early twentieth century saw new chairs of history established at the University of Edinburgh in 1901 and Glasgow in 1913, while the Scottish Historical Review published its first volume in 1903 (Kidd 1997, 102). Psychical history also emerged at this time when the professionalisation of history was forming as a distinct academic discipline (Harrison et al. 2004, 16).

6 Smith claims to have consulted the manuscript of *The Lamentable Estate and Distressed Case of Sir William Dick* (1657) now listed under MS 106 53, Signet Library, Edinburgh. (Smith 1898, xiv).

ryday with different milieus of thought exchanging ideas and concepts that were readily taken up by members of wider society, such as individuals like Smith who were especially receptive to them (Partridge 2013, 113–33). As Alex Owen has shown, at the turn of the century a "new occultism" attracted an educated middle-class, who increasingly sought to intellectualise their engagements with spirituality, which "involved the recuperation of modes of thought that rationalism had dismissed as irrational" (Owen 2004, 7–13). Attuned to the occultural context, Smith would have had the possibility of being informed by a range of theories that were in circulation.

This included those being proposed in the field of psychical research that sought to explain how knowledge of the past could be gained that could not have been learned or inferred by normal means. Among these was "retrocognition", a term coined by Frederic W. H. Myers (1843–1901). This concept is often used to interpret the mediumistic ability to remember past lives and is considered to be distinct and separate from the theory of reincarnation as the subject does not remember events in their own life but glimpses someone else's life through retrocognitive clairvoyance (Becker 1993, 31). In *Human Personality and Its Survival of Bodily Death*, published posthumously, Myers hypothesised that knowledge of the past was a manifestation of automatic communication that was received telepathically from another person, but he also proposed that it was possible to attain direct knowledge and facts about the past by what he called "retrocognitive telæsthesia" (1903, 31). He suggested, tentatively, the source of this knowledge may be a "world-soul" that is "perennially conscious of all its past, and that individual souls, as they enter into deeper consciousness, enter into something which is at once reminiscence and actuality" (Myers 1903, 31). In doing so, they recover isolated fragments of the past.

According to Myers these fragments may manifest as hypermnesic dreams, or dream memory, remembered as inferences that are retrospective of the past but which could also be circumspective and prospective about the present and future (Myers 1903, 132). He differentiated dream memory as distinct from direct retrocognition and premonition as part of his explanation of such manifestations while constructing his thesis about the subliminal self, asserting, therefore, "there is evidence to show that many facts or pictures which have never even for a moment come within the apprehension of the supraliminal consciousness are nevertheless retained by the subliminal memory, and are occasionally presented in dreams with what seems a definite purpose" (Myers 1903, 132). If this were to be applied to Smith's vision of the Grange House, the supposed purpose was to be prompted into historical research by heterodox means.

Myer's theories legitimised serious thinking about the role of historical recall in supernormal phenomena. However, investigative reports on retrocognition and dream memories noted a prevailing tendency for these manifestations to be received in first-person perspective, as though the percipient assumed the perspective of the spirit or previous consciousness to see the vision or apprehend the memory as it would have been seen or apprehended during the experience of the past occurrence. The percipient's comprehension of prior experiences of others as if they were

one's own is what David Ray Griffin later termed "retroprehension" to differentiate it from a retrocognitive clairvoyance that could account for other perspectives on the past (1997, 155–56). Smith's vision at the Grange House was not experienced as retroprehension as she did not see the scenes that unfolded through the eyes of the historical individuals as though receiving their memories. Instead her retrocognitive clairvoyance took the form of an onlooker, watching as a spectator or voyeur of the past. Her description of the vision while looking upon the scene with historical insight appears to be deliberately framed to imply her experience had objective distance like that of a historian.

Retrocognition as proposed by Myer attributed the acquiring of knowledge of the past by supernormal means to a special quality that comes from within the self in order to manifest retrocognition and dream memories. While according to Smith she certainly presented herself as having this personal ability, she placed equal emphasis on the significance of the physical location that initiated her vision with particular value attached to a proximity to historical sites, such as the "suggestive" qualities of Grange House (Smith 1898, xi).

Psychical researchers also proposed theories that externalised the source and causation of such visions, attributing supernormal qualities to the physical landscape or particular locations or settings that could activate certain phenomena. "Place-memory" was considered in the early days of the SPR as a hypothesis to account for mental or corporeal apparitions that seemed distinctly associated with a location (Heath 2005, 41). One of the early articulations of this idea was presented in Charles Babbage's *The Ninth Bridgewater Treatise* (1838), which outlined the ability of elements and places to retain the echoes of past events. In chapter 9 specifically, "On the Permanent Impression of Our Words and Actions on the Globe We Inhabit", Babbage mused "if the air we breathe is the never-failing historian of the sentiments we have uttered, earth, air, and ocean, are the eternal witnesses of the acts we have done" (1838, 112). He proposed, "the air itself is one vast library, on whose pages are for ever written all that man has ever said or women whispered" (1838, 112). It is worth noting that the metaphor of a library is telling as a place of reference where knowledge can be gained. Babbage's conceptualisation established the notion that impressions of past events could be recorded or fixed onto the world around us. Such ideas were taken up later in the century, usually in discourses on haunted houses. Eleanor Sidgwick (SPR), for example, suggested that there was "something in the actual building itself" (1885, 148) to explain a rapport that is dependent on locality. William Fletcher Barrett (SPR) furthered the idea proposing:

> Some kind of local imprint, on material structures or places, has been left by some past events occurring to certain persons, who when on Earth, lived or were closely connected with that particular locality; an echo or phantom of these events becoming perceptible to those now living who happen to be endowed with some special psychic sensitiveness. (1911, 197)

The theory did not have to always apply to a building or place. Any object could record the events of the past, whether it

was the stones in the wall, the furniture, or a physical thing that could be imprinted. Writing about recollections and relics of mortal life, Oliver Lodge (SPR) expanded on this point, "objects appear to serve as attractive influences, or nuclei, from which information may be clairvoyantly gained. It appears as if we left traces of ourselves, not only on our bodies, but on many other things with which we have been subordinately associated, and that these traces can thereafter be detected by a sufficiently sensitive person" (1909, 282). As far as psychical history is concerned in this regard, it is through psychical impressions that the excavation of knowledge from objects and places is possible.

Such ideas coincided with, and in some cases synthesised, the concept of psychometry. Coined by they physician Joseph Rodes Buchanan (1814–1899) in the 1840s, psychometry is the ability of sensitive individuals to gain information about an object's history or insights about its owner or individuals who had previously come into contact with it. Buchanan proposed psychometry as "the method of utilising psychic faculties in the investigation of character, disease, physiology, biography, history, palaeontology, philosophy, anthropology, medicine, geology, astronomy, theology and supernal life and destiny" (1893, 4). As an assistance to the study of history, Buchanan believed its application would recover forgotten knowledge "of unrecorded ages and nations, whose early history is lost in darkness" (1893, 72). Any historical artefact, whether a manuscript, artwork, crucifix, garment or keepsake, was "capable of revealing to psychometric exploration, the living realities with which they were once connected" (Buchanan 1893, 72). William and Elizabeth Denton's *Soul of Things* (1863) is perhaps the most famous response to Buchanan's theory. They carried out psychometric experiments primarily with mineral specimens, geological samples and fossils to explore deep time, but they also used architectural fragments. Experimenting with a piece of sandstone from Melrose Abbey in the south of Scotland allegedly resulted in the psychometrist seeing the historic structure of the abbey as it was in the eleventh century and feeling the historical tensions of the Borders region (Denton 1863, 163–67). In their conclusions psychometric attunement with the fabric of architectural structures also gave access to the past.

Theories on psychometry, psychical imprints and impressions would later become known as stone tape theory in paranormal studies.[7] Over the course of the nineteenth century, this genealogy of ideas in psychical research accounted for psychical history. It was these theories on hauntings, dream memory and object-recordings as vessels of knowledge capable of being received by the percipient alongside the conceptualisation of psychometric and clairvoyant visions that established the occultural context of intellectual thought which probably informed Smith's own ideas about her visions and her efforts to rationalise her endeavour to access historical knowledge as a consequence. As she explained, "geist-memories float in the palpitating air surrounding these old historic buildings" (Smith 1898, xi). Psychical history, then, informed by a range of theories, activated alternative modes of thinking

7 The popularisation of stone tape theory is attributed to archaeologist turned parapsychologist T. C. Lethbridge.

about the past, and offered ways of esoterically engaging with history.

## Spiritualism and engaging the past

While Smith's experiences and history-writing may have been informed by the burgeoning theories and ideas about psychical history that were formulating in the field of psychical research, she also drew her idiosyncratic understanding about historical engagements from a Spiritualist worldview. Spiritualism contributed to the occultural context with its claims of communicating directly with the spirits of the past. After all, records of nineteenth-century Spiritualist séances are littered with examples of spirits purportedly retelling episodes of their mortal lives, offering up historical insights from previous ages as revelations of the past.[8]

Just as the famous scientists appeared as spirit-guides in séances to act as authoritative voices on metaphysical matters, the presence of historical personalities in séances was also intended to function as a verifying factor. The accuracy of these spirits' testimonies about their earthly lives, presented as historical "facts" about recent or ancient times, was supposed to be checked for authenticity and, if accurate, was accepted as a form of validation, proving they had indeed returned from the dead. This in itself prompted a process of historical investigation by the séance sitters, seemingly intellectualising their participation in the séance.

Spiritualists were historically orientated and history-conscious beyond the séance circle too. For example, Emma Hardinge Britten (1832–1899) and Arthur Conan Doyle (1859–1930), renowned among the movement's advocates, set about the task of recording Spiritualism's history. Britten wrote *Nineteenth Century Miracles* (1884), her "historical compendium" of Modern Spiritualism, and Conan Doyle wrote a two-volume *History of Spiritualism* (1926). These endeavours demonstrate that the authors, and Spiritualists generally, conceived of history as having social, cultural and spiritual value within the movement. Spiritualist preoccupations with writing their own history and receiving information about history from spirits coalesced in the work of William Howitt (1792–1879). As an English historian, Spiritualist and psychical researcher he authored *The History of the Supernatural in All Ages and Nations*. This publication was presented to its readership as distinctive for the inclusion of Howitt's testimonies of his practical experiences with the spirits and their accounts of the past, which, he claimed, were informative sources as part of an "aggregate of historical evidence" (1863, iv). Howitt's history-writing was informed in part by psychical history.

It seems that Smith's own history-writing was also understood in these terms.

8 Perhaps the most prolific example of this was a series of séances by "historical controls" in the 1880s—with spirits ranging from "Brutus" to "Cromwell", from "Pericles" to "Isaac Barrow"—with transcripts being recorded by a sitter under the pseudonym A.T.T.P. These records were later collated for publication, see A.T.T.P., *Essays From the Unseen* (1885). Although these historical figures were typically famous and gave ideological speeches on contemporary issues from a historical perspective or spoke on the values of Spiritualism, among the historic controls were spirits of everyday people who also gave details about their time period. A.T.T.P., "The Spirit-Messenger", *The Medium and Daybreak* (1844, 451–53).

In *Light – A Journal of Psychical, Occult, and Mystical Research*, a review of *The Grange of St Giles* interpreted Smith's visionary experiences and research in mediumistic terms aiding her task as a historian: "We are inclined to suspect that in her later researches into the family history she was not left 'unguided' in her task by the 'ghosts' of the past centuries" (Anon. 1898, 286). Her Spiritualist readers certainly seemed satisfied that the study of psychical history was legitimate, declaring that the "visions witnessed by the authoress were all verified by her as her inquiries proceeded" and "the result in the end was the production of a valuable and interesting history of four hundred pages" (Anon. 1898, 286). She emerges in the review as medium-historian, guided by spirits to unveil historical knowledge.

## The Bygone Days watercolour paintings

Turning now to Smith's watercolour paintings in the Bygone Days series, it is possible to understand them as far more complex images than they may appear at first glance. Re-using her earlier watercolours from the 1860s and 70s as illustrations for her publication of *Historic Stones and Stories of Bygone Edinburgh* (1924), Smith gave these paintings an afterlife, and in doing so changed the framework of understanding to interpret her paintings.

In art history, the "afterlife of objects" refers to the enduring presence and continued significance of material objects beyond their initial intended use. It accounts for how objects accumulate stories, meanings and associations over time, shaping cultural narratives and personal experiences (Yonan 2011, 232–48). These objects often undergo transformations and recontextualisations, and can be repurposed and imbued with multiple meanings. The afterlife of objects can also be deeply personal, reflecting individual and cultural experiences (Appadurai et al. 1988). In the occultural context of psychical history and Smith's personal visionary experiences, alongside a deliberate choice to repurpose her paintings, the watercolours were given their afterlife.

In the occultural context of psychical history, "historic stones" in the title is suggestive. It references the architecture of the old town but also places emphasis on the stones themselves, which had, according to the theories outlined above, a way of engaging the spirits of the past. In the introduction, Smith explained the intention behind the writing of *Historic Stones*, stating, "I desire to simply catch the reverberating echoes of the past as they linger round the old historic buildings" (1924, x). This intention equally applies to her watercolour studies. Having already acknowledged she had attuned clairvoyantly to the echoes of the past at the Grange House, her statement here also implies her ability to be receptive to the psychical impressions in the streets of Edinburgh's old town.

The chapters of her book are dedicated to particular streets and buildings in Edinburgh, recounting their stories from local history, sometimes with embellishment and anecdotes. She peppered the pages with reference to supernatural and esoteric histories of the old town. For example, she tells the tale of infamous Major Weir with his magical black cane and midnight dealings with the devil; she recounts the magic mirror associated with Lady Stair's Close on the Lawnmarket; and she comments on the famous hauntings of Mary King's Close (Smith 1924, 35–38,


Figure 1. Jane Stewart Smith, *Candlemaker Row,* 1868. Illustration in *Historic Stones and Stories of Bygone Edinburgh*, 1924. Image: Michelle Foot, all rights reserved.

44–47, 314).[9] She digresses when mentioning Dr Samuel Johnson's visit to the city in 1773, remarking on his interest in haunted houses and the Highland faculty of second sight, and taking the opportunity to speculate that he would have been a psychical researcher: "Had Dr Johnson lived in our day he would have had ample scope for discussion on all these psychological topics, every form of occult manifestation being now openly confessed without fear of ridicule" (Smith 1924, 155). The text discloses Smith's interests in occult and psychical themes, and these references establish the conditions that facilitate a nuanced viewing of the accompanying images. The paintings are visions of the past both metaphorically and in actuality. Repurposed nearly sixty years after they were first painted, once documentations of a contemporary scene, by 1924 they had become a window into the Victorian past. On the one hand, they appear as mere illustrations of Edinburgh's old town. On the other, they raise the question of the presence of spirits manifesting in the historic streets. Although she does not state it so explicitly in her writing she presents Edinburgh as a compelling psychical landscape, one which mediates the spirits of the past.

The presence of spirits in the illustrations is alluded to in a number of ways. The first is negative space, implying an invisible

9 Today Mary King's Close is a popular tourist destination off the Royal Mile. Visitors frequently bring offerings for the ghost of a child who purportedly resides there.

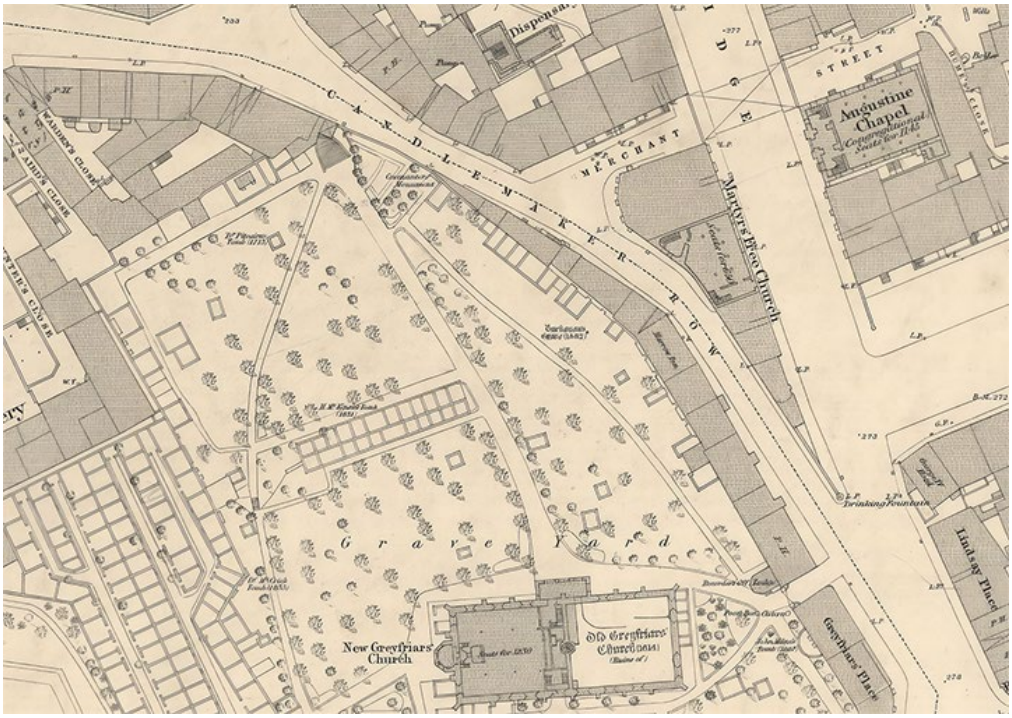


Figure 2. Detail of British Ordnance Survey Map: Edinburgh's old town, 1880 (Sheet 35). Reproduced with the permission of the National Library of Scotland, license CC-BY. Image source: maps.nls.uk/.

presence which is elucidated for the viewer only by reference to the text. This is the case in *Candlemaker Row* (1868, fig. 1.) The empty street is conspicuously absent of presence, only three persons being seen among the buildings—two on the stairway, one at their doorway, but none in the street. At first glance the image is seemingly unremarkable, but accompanied by a description in the text of a strange occurrence at the location and with Smith's psychical interests in mind, it takes on a different meaning. Writing of this street, Smith included an account of a man on horseback who once became aware of his friend riding up behind him. Only when he looked back over his shoulder for a second time did he realise he was not being followed after all. When he arrived home, he received news that his friend had died, falling from his horse while out riding that morning in the very same street (Smith 1924, 212). The reader is left to conclude it was his friend's ghost who rode along the street behind him. Although this scene is not illustrated, the image plays with the notion of what is seen and unseen in the seemingly ordinary streets of the old town. This is enhanced by the location of the scene. Candlemaker Row runs alongside the cemetery of Greyfriars Kirkyard, which is situated behind the row of buildings depicted in Smith's image (fig. 2). The street acts as a physical demarcation—a threshold, so to speak—between areas designated for the living and the dead, where metropolis meets necropolis. Those familiar with Edinburgh's geography would

Figure 3. Detail of Jane Stewart Smith, *High School Wynd*, 1868. Watercolour on paper, 34 x 23,8 cm. City of Edinburgh Council Museums & Galleries; City Art Centre. Image: Michelle Foot, all rights reserved.

understand the street is a borderland where spirit activity may be encountered.

When seeking to make the invisible visible, Smith appears to populate the streets with shadows among the mortal crowds to evoke spiritual presences. In her watercolour of *High School Wynd* (1868, fig. 3) semi-transparent, shadowy figures appear towards the end of the street. The shading is inconsistent with the rest of the image and the adjacent figures, who are fully formed with proper colouration and a sense of solidity. On closer inspection, the shadowy figures appear to lack some of the material substance of the other street dwellers. It is possible this is meant to be interpreted as spirits in their midst. The mortal realm was known as Shadowland by Spiritualists and here spirits are seen as shadows, like those in the allegory of Plato's cave, cast as an illusion among the mundane world of matter compared to the Spiritualist reality of the higher and brighter spiritual world. This sentiment was widely shared in the movement, as expressed in the Spiritualist newspaper *The Progressive Thinker*: "The spirit realm of which earth is but a fleeting shadow lies all about us, yet our dull vision fails to sense its nearness. Our spirit friends whose earth-life was but the shadow of their present real existence surround us, but we are too dull and befogged to understand" (Rigdon 1899, 7). Fellow Spiritualist Violet Tweedale (1862–1936) also contemplated the notion of spirit presences and manifestations all around us. She had grown up in Edinburgh believing in Spiritualism and wrote *Ghosts I Have Seen: And Other Psychic Experiences* (1920). Her grandfather was Robert Chambers, himself an author of the history of old Edinburgh and one of the city's earliest Spiritualist converts. Tweedale mused,

> We talk of "the other side", but is there another side? Again, all our evidence is against the term. To prove survival after death does not necessarily involve another habitat. Our dead may survive in this world. […] If we adhere to the evidence we at present pos-

> sess we would no longer suppose another world. We would simply enlarge the boundaries of this world. […] We would merely attach far more profound importance to this world in which incarnate and discarnate all dwell together. (1924, 69)

The spirits in *High School Wynd* certainly seem to dwell among the crowd. Smith held similar beliefs from her own experiences. She reported to *The Medium and Daybreak* that she had witnessed spirits wandering around her garden admiring the flowers as though it were a normal part of everyday life (Smith 1878, 449). If spirits can manifest in a garden, why not in the historic streets of Edinburgh?


Figure 4. Jane Stewart Smith, *St John's Close, Canongate*, 1902. Illustration in *Historic Stones and Stories of Bygone Edinburgh*, 1924. Image: Michelle Foot, all rights reserved.

Drawing on the occultural context and theories of psychical history about impressions on the physical environment that form images or visions which sensitive minds were able to perceive, shadows in Smith's illustrations take on deeper meaning. Although psychical impressions themselves are an invisible quality, as a visual artist Smith attempted to give them form, depicting them as shadows which take on a symbolic casting upon the historic stones—evoking psychical recording, accounting for the presence of spirits and esoterically connecting with the historical layers of the old town.

The use of watercolour is appropriate for visualising psychical impressions and spiritual manifestations. Although Smith probably opted for this medium because it was convenient for transporting around the old town while also conforming to gendered perceptions of such media as feminine, the effect of watercolour's transparency is one that reveals layers and conveys ethereal and diaphanous appearances. Pencil rubbings also feature in Smith's images to give the impression of textured stone and surfaces in the rendering of the architecture, but sometimes these appear as overlays or extensions beyond the physical structures of the built environment as though representing the psychical recordings themselves. These

pencil rubbings too are evocative of the reverberating echoes of the past and the palpitating air in the atmospheric substrate of the old town, elucidating an unseen force or quality that is recorded on the historic stones.

The study of natural shadow sometimes appears unusual and intense in Smith's imagery but this may be intentional when considering them as psychical imprints. In *St John's Close, Canongate* (1902, fig. 4), an illustration based on a more recent painting, the shadows express the idea of impressions on the historic stones.[10] The man carrying buckets casts a far greater shadow than he should naturally. Unlike the other shadow on the wall, which clearly delineates the outline of a building's roofline, the man's shadow does not form a human silhouette. The mass of this shadow seemingly captures the essence of Smith's line about "echoes of the past as they linger round the old historic buildings" as his presence imprinting strongly onto the street he inhabits. Belief that objects and architecture record events from the past, which sensitive people can attune to and replay, the shadow in this image functions symbolically as the echo: not merely the echo of the man's presence cast upon the street wall, but also the echo through time as a psychical impression that will be replayed to the percipient. Smith articulates her idea about impressions in the historical places she depicted, using shadows symbolically to convey the echoes of psychical history.

Figure 5. Jane Stewart Smith, *John Knox's Corner and the Old Exchequer*, 1867. Watercolour on paper, 34 x 23,8 cm. Image: City of Edinburgh Council—Libraries, all rights reserved. Image source: www.capitalcollections.org.uk

Another example is visible in *John Knox's Corner and the Old Exchequer* (1867, fig. 5). In the middle of the street, near the wheel of the coal cart, something spectral casts a shadow but it is mostly invisible. Wisps of paint allude to a presence, but only

10 Interestingly, this scene also depicts a liminal location like that of Candlemaker Row. St John's Cross, which gave its name to the close, marked the ancient eastern boundary of the Scottish capital according to Daniel Wilson's *Memorials of Edinburgh in Olden Times* (1875, 288).

Figure 6. Detail of *John Knox's Corner and the Old Exchequer*. 1867. Watercolour on paper, 34 x 23,8 cm. Image: City of Edinburgh Council—Libraries, all rights reserved. Image source: www.capitalcollections.org.uk

the shadow beneath the entity gives a firm sense of its existence (fig. 6). The shadow translates its ineffability into recognition as its psychical imprint, impressing upon the viewer this past spirit continues to linger in the street. As Smith declared, "ghostly visitations were not infrequent in Auld Reekie [Edinburgh]" (1924, 314), and here the spirit frequents the locality in which it once lived. The spectre's faint outline may also recall the transparency of spirits and ectoplasmic forms seen in contemporary spirit photography. There is another way of looking at this entity's form, however. There is a vague outline of bodily extension to its left side, perhaps a coal-sack similar to the one carried by the figure to the right of the cart. It is possible this could be *pentimento*, where Smith initially sketched the figure only to move him to another position as she worked out the composition. However, the prominence of this feature in the foreground, almost a focal point in the street, seems odd when the option to cover it with another group of figures or a cart would have made an adequate correction. She may have left it in, appreciating its effect. Amplifying a sense of ephemeral trace presence the spectre transgresses the bounds of time, an evocation of its endurance in the present as a spirit from the past. When connecting the spectral outline to the man making the coal delivery it shows how the psychical imprint is made—once cast on the street, the impression is fixed in time even when human life moves on.

In Smith's mind, in its historic location Edinburgh's old town was a psychically charged environment in which to make contact with the spirits of the past.

The psychical fabric of the city is important, both embodied in or imprinted on the physical layers of history. In what Freud described as the psychical entity of the city, where the past survives in historic places, "nothing that ever took shape has passed away, and in which all previous phrases of development exist beside the most recent. […] The observer would perhaps need only to shift his gaze or his position in order to see the one or the other" (1930, n.p.). The Bygone Days paintings simulate a clairvoyant vision when placed into the context of psychical history and they repicture the past as illustrations of the layers of time between the 1860s and 1920s. The paintings, repurposed and positioned into a Spiritualist worldview, make sense of Smith's connections with the past through psychical engagements.

## Conclusion

Smith was deeply concerned with esoterically perceiving and engaging history. In playing with the boundaries of history and the present, the seen and unseen, Smith's images engage questions about how to connect with the past and require a nuanced viewing to interpret their multivalent meanings. Psychical history is important as it offers a framework for understanding Smith's work, revealing the complexity of meaning behind her repicturing of the Bygone Days series as illustrations to *Historic Stones*, and their relationship with the occultural context of her historical insights in conjunction with psychical research. Participation in psychical history inspired her own endeavours at both history-writing later in her career as a form of generative knowledge production and the afterlives of her watercolour series not only as illustrative material but also as clairvoyant insights. Her ideas about the echoes of the past demonstrated an awareness of the latest theories in Victorian Spiritualism and psychical investigations, and her paintings require us to look again carefully. ■


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