

Exhibition Review: “The Undead Archive: 100 Years of Photographing Ghosts” at the University of Manitoba Archives and Special Collections

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Reviewed by

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A century ago, the prairie city of Winnipeg, Manitoba was the site of controlled psychic experiments led by prominent Victorian spiritualists, including physician Thomas Glendenning Hamilton, and nurse Lillian Hamilton. The husband and wife medical duo hosted a scientific séance laboratory in their home, where they conducted hundreds of experiments utilizing flash photography. They believed that their photographs documented “Ectoplasm”, a psychic force that they regarded as evidence of spirits surviving corporeal death.

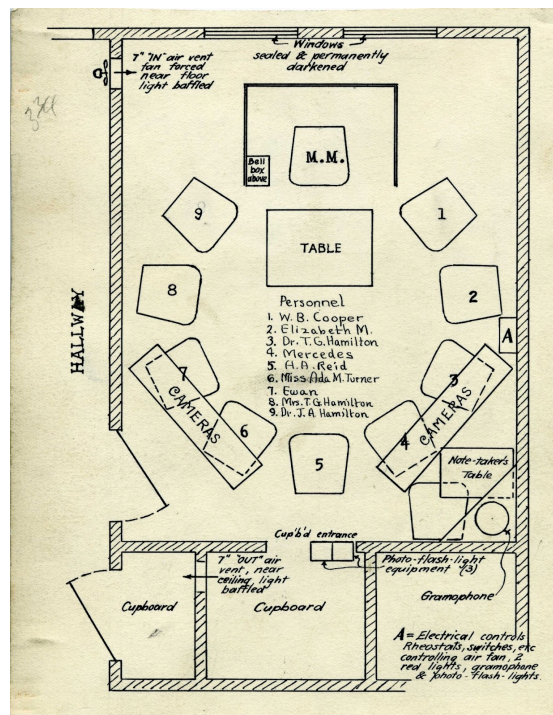
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The Undead Archive: 100 Years of Photographing Ghosts, is a series of exhibitions and events curated by Dr. Serena Keshavjee, in conjunction with the release of her book, *The Art of Ectoplasm: Encounters with Winnipeg's Ghost Photographs*, which examines the University of Manitoba's archival collection, the *Hamilton Family fonds*, from an art historical perspective. The focus of this review is the exhibition drawn from the archival collection that is on display from September 21, 2023 – April 21, 2024, at the University of Manitoba Archives and Special Collection Reading Room. As one of three exhibition sites, it is designed to dialogue with two exhibitions of contemporary artworks created in response to the *Hamilton Family fonds*. The exhibition mirrors the content of Keshavjee's book, supporting themes of historical context, archival exploration, and artistic response, and provides a historical overview of lesser-known aspects of the Hamilton family's psychic research.

Though the methods of the Hamilton séance laboratory were not scientifically rigorous, their records and photographic evidence are notable sources of cultural inspiration (Keshavjee, 2023, 7). The exhibition pulls together items from the Hamilton family's archives, including documentation of their pseudo-scientific methodologies, literature, photos, ephemera featuring women who were researchers and co-collaborators within the group, and the famous séance and ectoplasm "ghost" photographs. The impact of the séance laboratory on twentieth-century and contemporary literature and art, and its reception by the scholarly community is represented through displays of materials produced and inspired by the *Hamilton Family fonds*, and bibliographic works about the Hamilton family.

The exhibition establishes the scope and impact of the archival collection through a display in the entry to the Archives and Special Collections where original documentation of the séances is presented alongside materials inspired by these documents; spanning art, films, and novels. The experiments are portrayed through records such as diagrams, notes, trans analysis, annotated photographs and stereographs, examples of scholarly communications such as published articles, lecture notes, and tools such as stereoscopic viewers and a glass lantern slide projector. These items provide a glimpse into the process and technologies of studying séances from a scientific perspective.

The main exhibit is nestled in illuminated recessed glass cases around the perimeter of the Reading Room. Women engaged in psychic phenomena are





prominently featured, with displays that weave stories of their life events, experimentation, and scholarly impact. The exhibit highlights how women involved in the séance laboratory subverted and pushed the boundaries of Victorian perspectives of femininity, not only through their scientific and scholarly pursuits but also by engaging in psychic medium behaviours which deviated from Victorian feminine conduct. Though the identities of these individuals have traditionally been dismissed or overlooked, the exhibition centres these women as vital contributors. Each woman is introduced through a brief biography and curated and described objects. A full display is dedicated to Lillian Hamilton, researcher and co-collaborator on the scientific study of séances, including samples of her published essays and articles, literature about her experiments, notes detailing ectoplasmic materializations, photographs, and her annotated memoir. A subsequent display features Lillian Hamilton's

daughter, Margret Hamilton, an observer, participant, and documentor of the experimental séances. Finally, a third display features two additional women central to the experiments, Elizabeth Poole and Mary Marshall. These women, considered psychic mediums, are portrayed through photographs documenting their trance states, samples of their automatic writing and drawing, pieces of their correspondence, and their portraits and obituaries.

The permeating presence inspired by the séance laboratory activities is further demonstrated through a display of varied and rare bibliographic works about the Hamilton family and their archives presented in enclosed tabletop display cases. These displays culminate toward a presentation of the internationally known black-and-white photographs of telekinetic and ectoplasmic phenomena that document the séance laboratory experiments. These uncanny framed images dangle on a velvet black wall at varying heights, alluding to the ethereal and spiritual nature of the subject matter presented.

The curator provides context through exhibition statements presented on large-format mounted posters. Smaller paper-mounted descriptions provide thematic information, including details about the personal experiences and losses that shaped the featured individuals. Labels detail individual object's materials, medium, and date. The exhibition statement also alludes to the digital collection of the *Hamilton Family fonds*, which features 13,000 textual notes

documenting the séances and over 700 digitized images, including photos, stereo photographs, glass slides, and negatives.

The subject matter and its materiality offer a plethora of pedagogical entry points, as the interdisciplinary content can be studied from numerous subject perspectives. The weaving of the original psychical research, its reception, and its contemporary artistic responses demonstrate that “ghosts” in the archive are a continued source of fascination.

References:

Hamilton, T. Glen. *Hamilton Family fonds*. Archives and Special Collections, University of Manitoba.

Keshavjee, Serena. *The Art of Ectoplasm: Encounters with Winnipeg's ghost photographs*. 1st ed. Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 2023.

Image credit:

Group XIII, #48a - Second "Doyle" (Wide Angle). Hamilton Family fonds, University of Manitoba Archives & Special Collections - Hamilton Family fonds (PC 12, A.79-41). <http://hdl.handle.net/10719/1411808>

Telekinesis #6 - Diagram of Seance Room. Hamilton Family fonds, University of Manitoba Archives & Special Collections - Hamilton Family fonds (PC 12, A.79-41). <http://hdl.handle.net/10719/1411515>

Group XV, #55a - "Umbrella" Teleplasm, First Exposure (Enlargement, Wide Angle). Hamilton Family fonds, University of Manitoba Archives & Special Collections - Hamilton Family fonds (PC 12, A.79-41). <http://hdl.handle.net/10719/1409501>