

An Interview with Marc Demarest of the International Association for the Preservation of Spiritualist and Occult Periodicals (IAPSOP), and Curator of the Emma Hardinge Britten Archive

Ed.: What is the mission of IAPSOP?

M.D.: Pretty straightforward. We would like to digitize and make available all of the Spiritualist, parascientific and occult periodicals and monographs produced, in any language, between 1790 and 1940. We have a deliberately loose definition of “Spiritual and the occult”—so Freemasonry, phrenology, Shakerism, and Scientology are all, in our view, within that boundary. We’re starting too late, and so many periodicals we’ll never recover at all, and others we’ll only have exemplar issues for; there are no longer complete or near-complete runs held anywhere, by anyone. So it’s an ambitious goal, and one we know we can’t fulfill, ultimately. But rather than restrict the mission to what’s possible, we’ve kept it to “what’s desirable.” Our sense is that there is a lot of pressure on traditional libraries and research facilities to reduce costs—which seems to us to translate pretty directly to “reduce holdings”—and that researchers were not using periodical material because it is difficult and expensive to obtain. So we’re trying to be a safety valve for traditional repositories, and a more easily accessible resource for scholars and researchers.

Ed.: When did you start the website? Please give a little background information on yourself and the EHB Archive too.

M.D.: The importance of periodical literature for establishing the facts-on-the-ground became clear to me when I was working on what I thought, at the time, was going to be a biography of Emma Hardinge Britten, who edited three periodicals in the course of her career as a Spiritualist propagandist. Obtaining two of the three of those periodicals was difficult and expensive, and I decided no one else should ever have to go through that, so I digitized them, indexed them, and put them online after I obtained them.

That led Pat Deveney, the Paschal Beverly Randolph scholar, to remark

on the general usefulness of digitized searchable periodical materials, and so he and I started the alpha version of what has become IAPSOP to support our own work (which had overlapping subject matter). We mined Google Books and the Internet Archive, and converted a bunch of Pat's microfilm, learning the process (and the costs) as we went. I cobbled together various technology configurations; we did some testing of software, and at some point—I couldn't say when, precisely—we concluded others would find the resource useful as well. So we launched the web site some time in 2010, as I recall, and have been adding to it—and developing a larger customer base—since then. It helps to have Pat guiding the project, as his database of Spiritualist and occult periodicals (which we use on the IAPSOP web site) is the most complete database around, as far as I know, and there's very little about the periodical trade during the period that he doesn't know. As a result, we have a rather long "want list" and his database gives us a way of asking and answering the question "OK, the processing queue is empty—what should we go after next?" John Buescher, the John Murray Spear biographer, has also been a good guide for the American material, and has been one of our most diligent collectors. I bet he's spent several hundred hours so far, photographing periodicals, including many—like the *Medium and Daybreak*, and *Light*—that don't facilitate exploration of his own interests.

Right now, we're entering a phase where what we already-know-is-relevant is giving way to what-we-discover-to-be-relevant-as-we-build-up-IAPSOP. That's gratifying. We're always making fruitful connections—the connection between Shakerism and Spiritualism, for example, and the seminal role played by Shakers like David Richmond and F. W. Evans in the promotion and distribution of Spiritualist practices and ideas—but these days those connections are yielding: more periodicals to gather up. At the moment, for example, I'm collecting early Scientological material, a bit outside our boundary, as we've learned a lot more about the connection between "people who were Spiritualists, occultists, psychometrists, or astrologers in the 1940s" and "people who adopted Dianetics as a mental health regime in the 1950s."

Ed.: How many different titles are currently represented?

M.D.: We have about 330 titles published on the web site (which always lags), about 350 titles in the Google Drive distribution of IAPSOP, and

an additional 200 titles or so in what we call our “deep queue”—things we’ll get to “some day.” We tend to be a little enthusiasm-driven, so when something really remarkable gets donated, we focus on that immediately—largely because we learn things while we’re converting and processing the material. We had a Koresh period—of which you were a huge part—when we decided to gather up Koreshan materials, and more recently a really sharp private collector donated a large amount of rare William Dudley Pelley material to us—including a good chunk of his “lessons.” So we stopped working on things like the Spiritualist periodical *Light* (which we have, through 1914, in the deep queue) to process the Pelley material and get it out there. I confess it’s a bit fluid, our task list, and it’s driven by my personal curiosity, since I am processor-in-chief of the materials we gather up.

Ed.: Who have been your chief contributors of scanned materials and sleuths locating serial publications for the website?

M.D.: We have about a dozen contributors, and another dozen members of what we call the Digital Liberation Army: photographers who go to libraries and other repositories and photograph periodicals for us, for a fee. Deveney and Buescher are, by far, the largest individual contributors. Pat’s personal library is vast, and John wins the IAPSOP award for hours spent in libraries, photographing periodicals with a digital SLR. That can be mind-numbing work, and the entire community really owes John a debt for all the time he spent doing that. We know that a lot of academics have personal collections—usually, photocopies of periodicals—and we’re a bit surprised that more of our users have not become donors, as yet. But we’re hopeful. We’re making good connections in Europe, and we’re seeing the fruits of those connections in, for example, some of the European periodicals that were in the last major IAPSOP update a couple of months ago. For the record: we want people’s tatty photocopies, and will pay the postage to get them to IAPSOP Central.

Ed.: Does your audience include believers in Spiritualism/mediumship, as well as historical researchers?

M.D.: We serve all kinds of interests. As you know, we’re used extensively by academics: not only in research, but in their teaching. Several of my academic colleagues send their undergraduates into IAPSOP to dig around, which I think is a marvelous use of the resource, and teaches

undergraduates (I think) respect for the periodical record as a unique resource, while providing a lot of interesting detail on people who would otherwise be cardboard cutouts in those students' imaginations. We are definitely used by true believers; my close collaborators who are professed Spiritualists frequently take me to school on the material I'm working on, as well as pointing out places and items we should be gathering up. Leslie Price, the librarian at the College of Psychic Studies, is a fantastic resource for IAPSOP and for me personally. We're also used by people who are members of the organizations whose periodical or monograph material we capture—like the Church of Light—and by fledgling Spiritualist and occult groups who are forming, and need to build a library or curriculum that represents their tradition. We are completely agnostic—in the best sense of that word—as regards our customers. We want everyone to find what they're looking for. And we're used by amateur genealogists, who aren't always pleased by what they discover, although several have written to us to say "How exciting! I didn't know Uncle So-and-So was an occultist," or similar.

Ed.: Do you think the role of Spiritualism in American society during the second half of the nineteenth century has been properly contextualized and understood by historians?

M.D.: (Laughing). I don't. To be honest, I think it's been highly stylized and abstracted by many people, and hijacked by some people who find nineteenth-century Spiritualism a rich pretext for talking about other (often, post-modern) things. But there's something more fundamental, too, that's going on: we are often getting it wrong. A couple years ago, I was at an academic conference at which a paper was given, the thesis of which was in part that Spiritualists had no interest in, or understanding of, the notion of a four-dimensional universe. That is, of course, complete bollocks. But one can hardly blame the author of that paper for being so mistaken; one would have to have read hard-to-come-by periodicals and obscure books like C. C. Massey's translation of Zollner's *Transcendental Physics* (and to have known that Zollner's experiments were conducted with Henry Slade, and later William Eglinton—both master mediums) in order to "know better." Gathering up all that material, and making it searchable, lets us collectively "know better." If people choose to continue to stylize the movement as they have, or to requisition it for other purposes, so be it. But for people who want to understand Anglo-American Spiritualism,

at a fine-grained, on-the-ground level, we say: IAPSOP can help you do that, now, without devoting a couple decades to hunting down and reading truckloads of material. Just type (in this case) “fourth dimension site: www.iapsop.com” into the Google search box, and you’ll get more than ten pages of search results that demonstrate, pretty plainly, that Spiritualists had some definite, and definitely odd, views about the four-dimensional universe.

Ed.: What are your future plans for the website? Will you enhance the search functionality? Are there any Spiritualist bibliographic ghosts (bad pun, sorry) you’re still looking for that are “holy grails”?

M.D.: Well, you and your team found me an issue of the *Seraph’s Advocate*, so my number one itch—which I thought would never go away—has been scratched. Thanks for that. Our list of “holy grails” (an apt metaphor I think) changes from time to time. Buescher just located and arranged for us to capture partial runs of both the *Golden Gate*, an important West Coast Spiritualist periodical held nowhere in a complete run, and the *Age of Progress*, the Buffalo paper that covers the early days of the Davenport Brothers (when they were still called the Davenport Boys, and had a sister on the team as well), so those have come down in priority a bit. We had none of the *Golden Gate*, and three partial issues of the *Age of Progress*, before John pulled those rabbits out of his hat. I personally am searching for southern U.S. material at the moment—southern Spiritualism has, other than Nancy Schoonmaker, no flame-keeper, and finding its artifacts is going to be a hard row to hoe, so I feel like we have to get busy on that. And if anyone has a run of the *Beacon of Light*, from N.Y. in the 1880s, I would love to hear from them. That’s a window into phenomenal Spiritualism in the 1880s that I am afraid may be closed to us, forever.

In terms of plans—we’re currently building out “wings” of IAPSOP for two categories of items: ephemera, and private lessons and teachings. Brandon Hodge, the planchette authority, is really responsible for getting us into ephemera, as he explained how important that kind of material is for people who collect and curate the physical artifacts of Spiritualism and the occult. That wing is open, now. And the lessons wing is a Deveney-and-Demarest joint and still in the planning stage. Both of us are interested in how Spiritualists and the so-called Twilight Mages of the end of the 1880s

actually made their livings, and that is a lot about private lessons and mail-order courses, leveraging cheap postal and advertising rates. I purchased a private collector's library of lessons about a year ago, and it's sitting under my desk in my office, awaiting the attention of the scanner.

We've also gotten a very large donation—just in the last few weeks—of a substantial collection of the personal papers of J. M. Roberts, the editor of the Spiritualist periodical *Mind and Matter*. The collection is large—more than forty binders of correspondence, drafts and fair copies of various manuscripts and articles, along with some physical artifacts. That's going to send us in a new direction, as we develop relationships with traditional libraries, to house the original materials after we digitize them, and as we figure out whether those sorts of naturally occurring collections should have a distinct home on IAPSOP: roberts.iapsop.com, if you will. The Marion Skidmore Library in Lily Dale is going to house the Roberts materials, and we think that's appropriate, given his importance to the Spiritualist movement in the U.S., but we're hopeful that [a] we'll get more collections of this sort and [b] other libraries will want to work with us to take responsibility for collections after we've digitized them. I don't see us "improving search." We are indexed by Google, and we want to avoid, at all costs, building a walled garden where you get better search, and lose broad visibility via Google and other prime navigational resources. Plus, we're 100 percent volunteer labor, and a few of us with the wherewithal pay all of IAPSOP's bills, so we're not cash-rich or labor-rich. We get found by first-time users almost exclusively because we're well indexed by the big search engines, and as IAPSOP's de facto CTO, I am all about getting found by searchers. That's what belief systems are all about: searching, and finding. We already distribute both IAPSOP periodicals and the Standard Spiritualist and Occult Corpus (SSOC) via Google Drive, so search nuts—I am one—who want really sophisticated full-text retrieval can just subscribe to those distributions, and turn whatever tools they love to use loose on their own copy of both. I have, for example, been using Stanford University's Named Entity Recognition (NER) code, recently, to extract named entities from my personal copy of IAPSOP materials, and it's a trivial process when you're doing that using local technology resources on top of the Google Drive distribution of IAPSOP materials.

Ed.: What are your goals for the next year or so?

M.D.: Beyond continuing to produce material for people, I think IAPSOP's board would really like to see more contributors joining the effort, and in particular a better working network with colleagues and enthusiasts in Europe, South America, Australia, New Zealand, and Asia. We know that a lot of the material we don't have is in the hands of academics, in the form of bad photocopies and microfilm, and we want that material for IAPSOP. So—fingers crossed—based on the Roberts donation, the next year may prove to be a breakthrough for us, in terms of getting our contributor network to be as large as our customer network.

Ed.: OK, thanks so much, Marc!

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iapsop.com

to view this amazing archive.