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THE PARANORMAL: AN ENCYCLOPEDIA OF PSYCHIC PHENOMENA, by Brian Inglis (Granada, @12.95).

THE OTHER WORLD: SPIRITUALISM AND PSYCHICAL RESEARCH IN ENGLAND 1850-1914, by Janet Oppenheim (Cambridge, @25).

SORCERY, by Finley Hurley (Routledge, @14).

BYLINE: By Brian Bates

BODY:

PARAPSYCHOLOGY has come of age. Ominously. The Soviet and American governments are now investigating military applications of psychic powers and the results are, of course, classified. So whatever became of table-rappers, ghosts, poltergeists and dowzers strolling peacefully across the fields with their forked sticks? The answer is that they are still very much with us, and assume material form in the Brian Inglis's lively book *The Paranormal*.

Psychical researchers in this century have been holed up in laboratories like white-coated moles, digging for scientific evidence for the paranormal with which to convince the sceptics. But, Inglis argues, this sort of activity needs to be complemented by a revival of traditional techniques which pay attention to the naturally occurring experiences of ordinary men and women.

His book is packed with such examples, though some of the people he describes are not very ordinary, for example the eighteenth century writer and mystic Emanuel Swedenborg set out to demonstrate publicly his ability in clairvoyance. At a reception in Gothenburg attended by local notables he suddenly went into a trance and "saw and described the disastrous fire which was sweeping Stockholm 300 miles away, relating the course it was taking in vivid detail. When, later, a courier arrived from Stockholm it was found that the course which the fire had taken exactly matched Swedenborg's running commentary."

Sceptics, who have been known to go to considerable lengths to cast doubt on even the most carefully controlled laboratory studies, would probably claim that Swedenborg had an elite squad of trained psyromaniacs setting fires in a predetermined sequence through the unfortunate city. But to be fair to the sceptics (who are, by the way, in an ever diminishing minority . . . recent polls show that two thirds of the populace in Europe and North America now accept the existence of telepathy) there have been through the years many individuals who have been discovered perpetrating ingenious tricks to support fraudulent claims of psychic abilities.

Inglis has selected his material carefully, however, and while the examples are left for the reader to evaluate, he maintains a balanced and sensible commentary on the problems of evidence in this field. The book takes the form

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of an encyclopaedia with entries under nearly a hundred headings, including reported experiences of telepathy, precognition, ghosts, metal-bending and table-turning as well as some anomolous phenomena (UFOs, psychic surgery) often excluded from such collections.

For Inglis the sheer volume of accounts constitutes evidence of a kind, and the richness of the material in this book at least argues for the reintroduction of naturally occurring phenomena as a central concern in parapsychology. While it is unlikely that anecdotal accounts alone would carry weight as evidence, there is surely a case for the development of new techniques of observation, documentation and reporting . . . a kind of rescue archaeology of psychic experience. Brian Inglis's book as a good starting point.

Disenchantment with the prevailing orthodoxy has fuelled many a revolution in religion and science, as well as in politics. In *The Other World* historian Janet Oppenheim explores the Victorian fascination with Spiritualism. She explains that a turning away from the more severe and penitential aspects of the Christian church left a spiritual vacuum in the second half of the nineteenth century, which was made the more acute by the apparent rising tide of scientific materialism.

Spiritualism filled this need, and people from royalty to the poorest strata of Victorian society were reassured by mediums that there was a life after earthly existence, and that it could be contacted. Fraud was widespread, of course, but it did not dampen the enthusiasm, and some mediums became celebrities.

Oppenheim explores in detail the implications of this movement for the Church, and the attempts to provide a scientific basis for Spirtualism which formed the beginnings of today's parapsychology. The few references made to current research betray an ignorance of contemporary debate in science and medicine, but this does not detract from the qualities of this essentially historical study. This is a highly readable and satisfying book, and it deserves a paperback edition.

The paranormal has spawned a huge literature purporting to use scientific findings to support ideas which are, in fact, articles of faith. In *Sorcery* J. Finley Hurley argues that there is more to the effects of spells than mere superstition, and marshals a wide range of evidence to support the claim that there is a paranormal power to influence others from a distance. His lively but superficial presentation will appeal mainly to those already inclined to believe him.

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