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Grant Allen's Folk Horror Mediation of the Science and Spiritualist Debate

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Abstract

This essay reads Grant Allen's "Pallinghurst Barrow" as folk horror about the late-Victorian spiritualist debates. We read Allen's story as not only sympathetic to spiritualism, but also as critical of the gendered and genred politics of *fin-de-siècle* scientific materialism which would preclude such occult experiences—or what we frame as feminine ways of knowing. In both form and content, "Pallinghurst Barrow" challenges masculine science by foregrounding the powerful influence (on Rudolph, the protagonist) of the Gothic ghost story ("gipsy" Rachel's cautionary tale, repeated by young Joyce). Allen's interest in the folkloric origins of religion can be traced back to Herbert Spencer's "Ghost Theory," a proto-sociological explanation for the cultural construction and transmission of myth (or spirits). A lifelong friend and devotee of Spencer, Allen employs his mentor's sociology as a way to make sense of non-material forces, including the ghost story circle and its production of Gothic awe or wonder (the wonder tale). Ultimately, then, Allen's infamous folk horror reads as an allegory of late-Victorian spiritualist debates and, more importantly, as a defence of feminine modes of knowledge and myth-making through collective story-telling.

Keywords: Grant Allen; Pallinghurst Barrow; late-Victorian spiritualist debates; women and mediumship; Herbert Spencer's Ghost Theory; the ghost story circle; folk horror; imperial Gothic; *fin-de-siècle* literature

1. Introduction

> It's a very odd fact," Dr. Porter, the materialist interposed musingly, "that the only ghosts people ever see are the ghosts of a generation very, very close to them . . ."
>
> "Europe must be chock-full of them!" the pretty American assented, smiling; "though Amurrica hasn't had time, so far, to collect any considerable population of spirits."
>
> (Grant Allen, "Pallinghurst Barrow" (Allen 1892))

This excerpted post-dinner conversation, appearing midway through Grant Allen's "Pallinghurst Barrow," is pivotal to the short story for three reasons. First, it sets the stage for subsequent debates between characters on the close relationship between the rural ghost and its supposedly "modern" human counterpart. It also exemplifies Allen's interest in probing late-Victorian debates on spiritualism as a legitimate field. Dr. Porter here represents a new branch of science that emphasizes the importance of material evidence and the scientific method (positivism). He is challenged by Mrs. Bruce, a spiritualist, who insists that material evidence cannot be separated from theory or culture for reasons of bias.

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"Man is the focus of the glass of his own senses," she reasons, before recommending her publication on the topic, "The Mirror of Trismegistus," like a true academic.[1]

Our third reason to flag this fireside conversation is its emphasis on geography, particularly as it relates to colonial narratives at the *fin-de-siècle*. As quoted above, the pretty American cannot help but assume that North America has fewer ghosts because of the relativeness newness of white settlers on the continent. We interpret this brief allusion to European imperialism and ethnocentrism as a reminder of Allen's personal history, being both from the colonies (Canadian-born) yet privy to British spiritualist debates by way of his close friend and mentor, Alfred Russell Wallace. With this biographical context, "Pallinghurst Barrow" reads as its author's utilization of the late-Victorian colonial tale as a framework through which to reconcile Wallace's efforts to legitimize spiritualism against emergent, positivist social sciences. Allen's narrative mediation especially engages Herbert Spencer's "Ghost Theory," which argues that spirits are merely the effects of cultural imagination. A lifelong friend and devotee of Spencer, Allen presents the ghost story and its inducement to Gothic awe in similar terms to nascent sociological theories of religion and cultural ritual. Allen's folk horror story is, then, both allegory of late-Victorian spiritualist debates and an implicitly Eurocentric treatise on the spiritualist dimensions of the new social "sciences."

This article also takes the unusual approach of reading "Pallinghurst Barrow" as a contribution to modern scientific debate that revives folk epistemologies like storytelling as a legitimate alternative means of cultural transmission and meaning-making. Allen models this through his reflexive use of Gothic ghost story tropes that test our protagonist Rudolph Reeve's acceptance of the supernatural. Joyce, the young daughter of the party's hostess, especially symbolizes this kind of cyclical folk tradition by verifying and sharing Rudolph's otherworldly encounter. Allen further mediates these scientific debates by complicating the gender divide between masculinized materialism and feminized spiritualism. He adjoins the folk tale with *fin-de-siècle* colonial narratives, forms of storytelling that are likewise gendered as feminine and masculine, respectively. Rudolph's reliance on the young girl's authority—itself derived from her nursemaid, Rachel—suggests Allen's critique of hypermasculinist stories that aim to counteract fears of cultural and colonial degeneration. Indeed, it is not a man of conquest or even science who identifies the horrors of Pallinghurst Barrow, but a girl fluent in the femininized worlds of folk tradition, storytelling, and the supernatural. Read as a comment on the spiritualist debates, Allen's folk horror leaves readers with the impression that the Gothic ghost tale is its own form of religion that binds us through shared myths in the church of popular culture. Ghosts may be elusive, but ghost stories are viscerally palpable.

2. Mediating Positivism and Spiritualism Through the Folk Horror Rural Encounter

Before pursuing our analysis of Allen's contribution to folk horror, it is necessary to first define the genre within its many permutations. Adam Scovell argues that folk horror is marked by four key characteristics:

(1) Landscape (usually rural or "of the folk");
(2) A sense of isolation (the reversal of/dislocation from modernity);
(3) Skewed morality (of the isolated community);
(4) The culminating "summoning or happening." (*Folk Horror*, Scovell 2017, pp. 17–19; See also Ingham et al. 2018, *We Don't Go Back*, p. 8).

We would add, or make explicit, two further points: first, folk horror is predominantly interested in narrating the encounter between city-dwellers (coded as modern) and rural folk, who are often associated with an idealized or constructed image of the past. Some

folk horror depicts rural communities as monstrously regressive, as seen in Robert Louis Stevenson's "Thrawn Janet" (1881) or Bailie Reynolds's "A Witch Burning" (1909), two stories that reveal their respective small-town characters' conservative attitudes toward unconventional women. Other tales like Thomas Hardy's "Withered Arm" (1888) and Shirley Jackson's "The Lottery" (1948) use rural folk as a mirror to urban society which, despite its appearance of modernity, likewise engages in arcane ritualism.[2] These stories allude to our second additional point, that the combination of skewed morality and isolation inherent to the genre produces a vision of gender that is necessarily simplistic and regressive. Folk horror distils gender into a supposedly natural pre-modern binary by which characters—urbanites and rural folk alike—are punished, outcast, or sacrificed depending on their adherence. Indeed, the genre is an archive as to how communities weaponize gender conformity to purge that which is Other in the guise of tradition.

"Pallinghurst Barrow" is well-versed in the folk horror genre, as suggested by its tropic premise: a city-dweller is drawn to the country in search of a cure for his modern alienation.[3] Rudolph is a young "journalist and man of science" burnt out from writing about global economics (p. 3). The story begins with him enjoying a quiet September evening stroll along the Old Long Barrow. He knows that "It [is] getting late," and that his hostess Mrs. Bouverie-Barton is "a stickler for punctuality," yet he cannot help but linger: "Rudolph sat and gazed out, with all the artistic pleasure of a poet or a painter (for he was a little of both) in the exquisite flush of the dying reflections from the dying sun upon the dying heather" (p. 3). Despite Rudolph's association with science, it is his "artistic" side that makes him realize, with "a very weird yet definite feeling," that he is not alone on the moors:

> In spite of sight and sound, however he was still deeply thrilled by this strange consciousness as of something living and moving in the barrow underneath; something living and moving—or was it moving and dead? Something crawling and creeping, as the long arms of the sundews crawled and crept around the helpless flies, whose juices they sucked out. (p. 3)

These "crawling and creeping" insects parallel the movement of Rudolph's "strange consciousness" as it creeps deeper "underneath" the barrow, mentally excavating the "dead" below (p. 3).[4] No amount of empirical research ("Strange!—he saw and heard absolutely nobody and nothing" [p. 3]) nor reasonable argument ("this is nonsense" [p. 3]) can convince Rudolph that he is alone. In addition to its folk horror trappings, the scene reveals its Gothic influences in Rudolph's simultaneous feelings of apprehension and pleasure from this return of the symbolic past. The insects and spectres creep from beneath, and yet he is "deeply thrilled" by their "strangely fascinating" (p. 3) presence and resents his need to return to civilization in the form of his hostess's dinner party. Rudolph's ambivalent reaction foreshadows Allen's problematizing of spiritualism as the stuff of imagination that still has the power to create what feels like reality.

As Rudolph here demonstrates, urbanites in folk horror experience the rural as both pleasurably pastoral and frighteningly foreign. In *Making Monsters* (2021), David Livingstone Smith explains the difference between two degrees of fear that we argue track Rudolph's escalating relationship with the folk, namely, the creepy—which is unsettling or disturbing (p. 245)—and the horrific, which is "cognitively threatening" and crosses over into the monstrous, or that which "subvert[ts] the natural order" (p. 254). Rudolph's two explorations of the barrow in the story are a tonal transition from creepiness (being watched) to outright horror when the watchers later threaten to sacrifice him to their ghost king. With this shift, Allen demonstrates how the creep can be dangerous by nature of its ambiguity. Rudolph initially justifies his sense of creep as either the natural "loneliness of the moor" or the necessity of being "not one minute late" for his hostess's strict schedule

(p. 4). In his retreat from the city, Rudolph discovers that the rural is both a possible remedy and intensifier to his pre-existing sense of modern alienation.

True to the folk horror genre, "Pallinghurst Barrow" derives much of its scares from rural peoples whose traditions are somehow out of sync with modernity.[5] Rudolph returns to the country manor, what should be the bourgeois domestic sanctuary, but which is instead defined by its focus on the folk. Chapter two opens with our protagonist engaged in a pre-dinner conversation with hostess Mrs. Bouverie-Barton and her daughter, Joyce. There are other guests present, including the "pretty American," but it is little Joyce who captures Rudolph's attention with her account of Pallinghurst's legendary autumnal equinox. The story comes from her nursemaid, "old Rachel, the gipsy," who taught her to remember:

> Every year on Michael's night
>
> Pallinghurst Barrow burneth bright (pp. 5–6)

Beyond her symbolically anti-modern status as "gipsy," Rachel embodies the "folk" by virtue of this oral narrative tradition. Her passed-down mythology of the equinox, now continued by Joyce, invokes the folk origins of fairy tales which were similarly shared by common people and then recorded by antiquarians and social-historians,[6] a group to which many of the houseguests belong. But this is more than superstition: Rachel's tale resurrects (so to speak) a folk pre-history of the barrow. Joyce explains that the equinox used to be "Baal's night before it was St. Michael's," thereby alluding to pre-Christian/Celtic beliefs that now only exist in mythology (p. 6). Joyce's further remembrance of Rachel's teachings alludes to an even deeper pre-history ("it was somebody else's night, whose name I forget, before it was Baal's") before concluding with a warning of violence: "[a]nd the somebody was a god to whom you must never sacrifice anything with iron, but always with flint or with a stone hatchet" (p. 6). The chapter ends when Joyce's mother, who dislikes all talk of the supernatural, interrupts her guests' conversation and hustles them to the dining room. Mrs. Bouverie-Barton is "a famous Woman's Rights woman" (p. 3) presented as "nothing if not intensely modern," not unlike Rudolph (p. 5). Her dismissal positions Rachel's folk knowledge as incongruent with the modern, scientific sphere she curated for her dinner party. Mrs. Bouverie-Barton is a New Woman who shirks the feminized tradition of supernatural storytelling as perpetuated by her daughter and nursemaid Rachel in favour of positivist accounts for reality. From this gendered perspective, our hostess is experiencing her own folk encounter with ghost stories as a regressive form of femininity that must be stamped out from modernity.

Mrs. Bouverie Barton's antagonism toward folk superstition invites other characters and the reader to also question its validity. Unfortunately for our hostess, her guests find Joyce's tale "profoundly interesting," and they insist upon hearing her "so-much wanted first-hand evidence" of the supernatural (p. 6). An ensuing debate on the subjects of ghosts quickly moves from the specifics of Pallinghurst Barrow to a more general argument on the merits of Victorian materialism and spiritualism. Professor Spence, a man with a "scientific smile," offers his academic assessment of the region's pre-history:[7]

> The Picts, you recollect, were a deeply religious people, who believed in human sacrifice. They felt they derived from it high spiritual benefit. And the queerest part of it all is that in order to see the fairies you must go round the barrow widershins—that is to say, Miss Quackenboss, as [Mr.] Cameron will explain to you, the opposite way from the way of the sun—on this very night of all the year, Michaelmas Eve, which was the accepted old date of the autumnal equinox." (p. 7)[8]

Professor Spence ties the barrow spirits with the Picts, thus placing them geographically and temporally in early medieval Scotland. We shall return to this non-North American setting when discussing the story's colonial implications. More pertinent, however, is the sarcastic response from "materialist" Dr. Porter, who refuses to entertain the legitimacy of ghosts (p. 7). "[T]he only ghosts people ever see," he argues, "are the ghosts of a generation very, very close to them" (p. 7). Dr. Porter emphasizes the necessity of hard evidence to determine fact, highlighting the obvious subjectivity of ghost sightings. Victorians, for example, do not speak of Elizabethan ghosts because they "are seldom acquainted with ruff's and farthingales" (p. 7). In other words, people only witness spirits who lived in close proximity to their lifetimes and seemingly none from the countless generations which preceded them. He thus imposes a scheme of legitimacy that considers personal accounts and other forms of immaterial evidence to be the stuff of biased persuasion.

Dr. Porter's scepticism is a reminder of Allen's personal connection to Alfred Wallace, the renowned naturalist-turned spiritualist, not only because of his insistence on empiricism but also because of his critical (if not cynical) take on human psychology and cultural influences.[9] Donald R. Forsdyke explains that Wallace was "an open advocate of spiritualism," and his books *The Scientific Aspect of the Supernatural* (1866) and *On Miracles and Modern Spiritualism* (1874) were quite popular on both sides of the Atlantic by the *fin-de-siècle* ("Grant Allen", Forsdyke 2004).[10] As suggested by its title, the first of these works insists there are indeed "scientific aspects" through which one can verify supernatural contact.[11] The factualness of his methods, though, is perhaps overstated. Consider his description of spiritual contact from *On Miracles*:

> In the infinite universe there may be infinite possibilities of sensation, each one as distinct from all the rest as sight is from smell or hearing, and as capable of extending the sphere of the possessor's knowledge and the development of his intellect as would the sense of sight when first added to the other senses we possess. Beings of an ethereal order, if such exist, would probably possess some sense or senses of the nature above indicated, giving them increased insight into the constitution of the universe, and proportionately increased intelligence to guide and direct for special ends those new modes of ethereal motion with which they would in that case be able to deal.
>
> ("Ch 3: Modern Miracles", Wallace 1875)

Wallace claims not only the existence of non-material forces, but that these "beings of an ethereal order" are able to "guide and direct" their surrounding environment ("modes of ethereal motion") in ways one might not perceive.[12] Wallace's theory of human-spirit interaction is more akin to theories of creationism (i.e., a cultural construction based in tradition) than it is an example of positivist science. As Michael Flannery puts it, Wallace's spiritualism is actually "intelligent evolution and a scathing indictment of materialism" (p. 145).[13] His scientific justification is more accurately an un-scientific advocation for immaterial forms of evidence like feeling to be considered legitimate.

"Pallinghurst Barrow" exploits the apparent contradictions in Wallace's theory by dividing them between avowed materialist and spiritualist characters, whose arguments constitute the dinner table conversation. The "pretty American" endorses Dr. Porter's sarcastic remark that time accounts for greater numbers of ghost, which is why North America—her home and the author's—is comparatively ghost-free. Unspoken but implicit within this position is the possibility for material evidence in the form of quantitative data. Spiritualist Mrs. Bruce, however, opposes the idea that the vast spirit realm can be accounted for by Earthly means. She suggests its complexity is why people only seem to witness ghosts that reflect their own culture milieux: "All the spirits of all that is, or was, or ever will be, people the universe everywhere, unseen, around us, and each of us

sees of them those only he himself is adapted to seeing" (p. 8). Mrs. Bruce concludes by critiquing Dr. Porter's scientific rationality as a drain on his spiritual side, which has made him ignorant "to one whole aspect of nature" (p. 8). In other words, the spirit realm can only be accessed, and thereby verified, if one is already sold on its existence.

Mrs. Bruce's theory that "Man is the focus of the glass of his own senses" (p. 7) reminds readers that Rudolph's senses are what alerted him to (and steered him from) the watchers in the barrow. It is a sudden and "very weird yet definite feeling" that shifts his perspective on the landscape from calm and "beautiful" to "crawling and creeping" (p. 3). We consider this initial encounter as an example of Wallace's argument against positivism as the only legitimate evidentiary framework. Certainly, Allen presents Rudolph's subjective experience as reality for both our protagonist and the reader. There are no tangible signs of spirits, just his "definite" feeling "through an external sense, but by pure internal consciousness, of something or other living and moving within the barrow" (p. 3). Rudolph's ordeal also demonstrates Mrs. Bruce's position that belief opens the door to the supernatural realm. Unlike materialist Dr. Porter, Rudolph has not succumbed to the limiting tyranny of rationalism. He has the "artistic" sense of a "poet or a painter (for he was a little of both)," despite coming from the data-driven world of economic journalism (p. 3). Still, his experience remains a suspicion until Joyce's later testimony elevates it to an actuality.

Rudolph's first encounter reflects the feelings-driven evidentiary framework proposed by Wallace and personified by Mrs. Bruce, but his second experience complicates the matter by evoking Dr. Porter's claim that apparitions are perhaps more accurately psychological fictions. Indeed, Allen introduces several plot elements that cast doubt on Rudolph's narratorial reliability. Dr. Porter prescribes him liquid "*Cannabis Indica*" for a migraine the night he ventures back into the barrow (p. 9); Rudolph still feels poorly and decides to drink the entire bottle (p. 9). Further still, Rudolph reads Robert Browning's poem "Childe Roland to the Dark Tower Came" (1855), the plot details of which foreshadow his later escape from human sacrifice at the hands of a barbarian king. The seeds of doubt are thus planted: Rudolph's sense of reality is blurred by hallucinogenic drugs, and his ghostly contact is preceded by a conspicuously similar story. Considering the dinner debate and Rudolph's two encounters together, Allen refuses to endorse either materialism or spiritualism as the superior mode of supernatural confirmation. Allen's parable instead suggests that the existence of spirits is secondary to the more palpable power of narrative. "Pallinghurst Barrow" is not a test of hard science against faith, but an exploration of the material bonds formed through folk storytelling and tradition.

3. Spencer's Ghosts: Relocating *Fin-de-Siècle* Fears of Degeneration to the Rural Folk

Rudolph's curiosity about the watchers (urged by young Joyce) returns him to the barrow where he is transported back "ten thousand years" and captured by "a ghostly throng of naked and hideous savages" (p. 10). These uncanny prehistoric humans speak in a "barbaric tongue—all clicks and gutturals," which Rudolph can understand though they cannot understand him (p. 11). His ability to interpret the spirits echoes Mrs. Bruce's theory that the spirit realm is only discernible to those who are prepared to receive it. Allen's presentation of language as linear (i.e., Rudolph's ability to build on latent ancestral knowledge) also demonstrates the author's thematic interest in Herbert Spencer's unique brand of evolutionary theory. Spencer was an early proponent of evolution and was keen to reference it in his writings on social organizations and culture that later coalesced into the concept of Social Darwinism.[14] Allen deploys Spencer's theory by depicting Rudolph's articulate English as the progression of the spirits' "inarticulate" "clicks and gutturals" from

a non-specific yet "elfish" (p. 11) folkloric past. Ironically, Rudolph's modernity renders him primitive in the eyes of the hoard:

> 'What does he say?' the king cried, in the same transparently natural words, whose import Rudolph could understand at once. 'How like birds they talk, these white−faced men, whom we get for our only victims since the years grew foolish! 'Mu−mu−mu−moo!' they say, 'Mu−mu−mu−moo!' more like frogs than men and women!'. (p. 11)

The terror of this moment is Rudolph's realization that he has been outmatched by a world considerably less developed than his modern England. Allen's folk horror, though set in rural Britain, mirrors *fin-de-siècle* Gothic tales of the colonial Other that serve to reinstate British (male) control. The racialized spirits of "Pallinghurst Barrow" test Rudolph's masculine resolve and his cultural superiority—evergreen themes in return of the repressed narratives. By entering the past, Rudolph and the reader are confronted by the deficiencies of the present. Indeed, Allen's most frightening spectre is the shadow of cultural devolution and the creep of the racialized, repressed Other.

Rudolph's supernatural time travelling and brush with death reflects Smith's aforementioned definition of horror as the psychological dissolution of the natural order (D. L. Smith 2021, p. 254), as well Scovell's second point on folk horror tradition, the reversal of modernity (pp. 7, 10; See also Ingham et al. 2018, p. 45). Allen deploys this reversal in the return of arcane ritual (human sacrifice) through which the symbolic past is resurrected via its literal consumption of the present. Allen's focus on ritualism is not dissimilar from Spencer's treatment of religion in his essay, "Manners and Fashion" (1854), in which he argues that early religion is derived from cultures of ancestor-worship:

> the aboriginal god is the dead chief: the chief not dead in our sense, but gone away, carrying with him food and weapons to some rumoured region of plenty, some promised land, whither he had long intended to lead his followers, and whence he will presently return to fetch them. This hypothesis, once entertained, is seen to harmonize with all primitive ideas and practices. (*Essays*, Spencer 1891, p. 7)[15]

Spencer's writings on this theme became known as his "Ghost Theory," what is now called "Manism" or the cult worship of ancestors.[16] Spencer further argues that the history of religion is, in fact, a history of culture (here, the oral tale): "The maxims and commands [worshipers] uttered during their lives are held sacred after their deaths, and are enforced by their divinely-descended successors; who in their turn are promoted to the pantheon of the race, there to be worshipped and propitiated along with their predecessors" (*First Principles*, Spencer 1862, pp. 158–59). Apart from suggesting its author's agnosticism, this passage implies a certain continuity between modern religions and ancient pre-Christians whom Spencer—like Allen—labels "Barbarian." Spencer's theory assumes progress by stressing the teleological structure of this relationship, meaning the ancient is displaced by the modern. The tension of Allen's folk horror, however, is that progress has proven to be less assured than Spencer's "Ghost Theory" posits. As demonstrated by Rudolph's watchers, the past is ready to "creep" its way back if the present degenerates to a point of weakness.

Published in the early years of the 1890s, Allen's tale exploits late-Victorian fears of social degeneration by effectively inverting Spencer's progressive vision of human evolution.[17] Matthew Potolsky describes the *fin-de-siècle* as a period marked by a "palpable sense of anxiety and pessimism that succeeded the optimism of the high-Victorian moment," which Victorian social critic Max Nordau ominously called the "Dusk of Nations" (p. 698) in his influential monograph *Degeneration* (1892). Noradu's book is iconic both for its

description of the period's morbid character and its effort to characterize cultural sunsetting through evolutionary terms–that is, as the stuff of reverse evolution:

> In the civilized world there obviously prevails a twilight mood which finds expression, amongst other ways, in all sorts of odd æsthetic fashions. All these new tendencies, realism or naturalism, 'decadentism,' neo-mysticism, and their sub-varieties, are manifestations of degeneration and hysteria, and identical with the mental stigmata which the observations of clinicists have unquestionably established as belonging to these. But both degeneration and hysteria are the consequences of the excessive organic wear and tear suffered by the nations through the immense demands on their activity, and through the rank growth of large towns. (ch 4. "Etiology" p. 43)

Nordau's reference to esthetic modes like decadence and naturalism suggests that his concern is the world of culture being somehow at odds with the real or the "organic" ("wear and tear"). His interest in hysteria is prescient, for most modern critics think of the period as defined precisely in terms of anxiety and paranoia. Potolsky's (2018) definition of the *fin-de-siècle*, for example, lists a combination of dominant cultural anxieties "from an intuition of imperial decline, to discomfort at the increasingly evident contradictions of global capitalism," and that fear of the end of the century is likewise fear of the end of empire ("a sense of closure and decay founded on the anthropomorphic analogy between an era and a life" (p. 698). We argue that Allen uses the setting and generic trappings of folk horror to investigate this social turn against globalism on British soil, particularly as it relates to reasserting Victorian cultural supremacy whilst tampering the "excessive" effects of modern culture (p. 43).

Fundamentally, folk horror represents a nostalgic return to the rural as a premodern world of shared traditions and stories. Indeed, the folk in these tales engage "with aspects of British culture that are not governed and controlled by an increasingly global, glossy, homogenous, superficial culture industry" (Newland 2016, p. 176). Dawn Keetley and Ruth Heholt explain that "folk horror finds its roots in the dark 'folk tale,' in communal stories of monsters, ghosts, violence and sacrifice that occupy the threshold between history and fiction" (p. 21). On this point, Keetley and Heholt cite Simon J. Bronner's (2017) discussion of the folk "as an adjective meaning" for "traditional," or as "bound up in the processes of 'intergenerational transmission and localized culture'" (p. 21).[18] The folk-horror return is thus a return to an imagined past of cultural continuity and insularity. In more self-conscious versions of this genre—like Allen's, we argue—the rural is sought as a space where the urban individual might escape the dangers wrought by global capitalism. However, the rural inevitably subverts this expectation by presenting these modern fears in the form of the folk. Rudolph, for example, flees to Pallinghurst Manor after "overworking his brain in town" on his fortnightly article "The Present State of Chinese Finances," a set-up that captures the psychological drain of urban industry as well the (here, literal) weakening effects of globalism (p. 5). Rudolph must overcome his anxiety toward global forces, as symbolized by the spirits, by embracing a colonial form of masculinity that aims to subdue the racialized Other and re-establish (white, male) British authority.

The need to dominate or reassert power is a popular theme within the many subgenres that proliferated during the *fin-de-siècle*. Patrick Brantlinger suggests that the rise of the imperial Gothic, for instance, indicates a cultural desire for reclaimed authority. "The three principal themes of imperial Gothic are," he explains, "individual regression or going native; an invasion of civilization by the forces of barbarism or demonism; and the diminution of opportunities for adventure and heroism in the modern world" (p. 30). While the setting and results may vary, all three scenarios of the imperial Gothic tend to reproduce the same story of masculine conquest and subjugation of a racialized/feminized

Other. Folk horror shares this Gothic preoccupation with an emasculated subject, though it is distinguished by transposing this gendered (genred) struggle from the colonies and onto the English countryside. Simon Bacon and Katarzyna Bronk-Bacon explain this connection between folk storytelling and colonialism as the output of cultural nostalgia:

> As such, one can argue that the fear of the decline of the British Empire at the end of the nineteenth century was fuelled by the anxieties around a toxic kind of nostalgia, around a more vibrant, hyper-masculine past that was configured as conquering the world; a monstrous memory that saw the present as emasculated and open to invasion by reverse colonialism. It is in this sense that one can start to frame such forms of nostalgia as being excavated from the grave due to the discontent of a given society with its present. (*Gothic Nostalgia*, Bacon and Bronk-Bacon 2024, pp. 3–4)

In short, the return of the repressed in folk horror serves as a psychological projection of the modern urban subject's gendered and/or colonial fears of cultural decay. The emphasis on conquest ("conquering the world," as Bacon sand Bronk-Bacon suggest above), is what makes this imagined history "toxic."

"Pallinghurst Barrow" demonstrates how folk horror can facilitate both this toxic nostalgia and the *fin-de-siècle* trope of masculine affirmation. It also reveals that storytelling is at the root of this toxic nostalgia. This is not to say that storytelling and oral tradition are inherently destructive, but rather it is a statement on their affective power. This connection is seeded by Mr. Cameron, an historian and guest at the manor, who encourages Joyce to share more of Rachel's tale. Despite being a man of science and "a disbeliever in most things," Mr. Cameron "still retains a quaint tinge of Highland Scotch belief in a good ghost story" (p. 6). Mr. Cameron embodies the heady mixture of nostalgia and modernity that at once allows him to assert his rational materialism—he wants to hear it for "first-hand evidence"—while maintaining his belief in the value of inherited stories. Mr. Cameron does not believe in ghosts, but "good" ghost stories, a distinction tied to both his rural background (Highland) and cultural identity (Scotch). Ghost stories are of course effective with or without "evidence" of their legitimacy. The implication, then, is that someone of the folk like Mr. Cameron understands the value of storytelling as a means of cultural transmission. Afterall, it is he who encourages young Joyce to retell the legend which spurs Rudolph into masculine action.

Mr. Cameron's Highland perspective reminds us that folk stories are a source of entertainment and intellectual curiosity. Rudolph's adventure, however, demonstrates the danger of filtering fact through fiction. We can infer Pallinghurst Barrow is somewhere in Scotland given the presence of Mr. Cameron, Pict artefacts, and heathered hills, though its location is never confirmed. Professor Spence even muses that it may be the barrow from Browning's "Childe Roland" (p. 7), which Rudolph reads before venturing into the spirits' cave. Of the region's history we may only be certain that it is rural and somewhere in the former land of the Picts. That is until Rudolph meets the ghostly "savages" who are dressed in "buffalo-hide" and crying the "whoop of the Red Indian" (p. 10). Allen's racist invocations of Indigenous Peoples transpose the scene from Britain to North America—Allen's home. In turn, the barrow becomes an amalgamation of differing continents, time periods, and cultures; it is everywhere and nowhere. These anachronisms allude to Mrs. Bruce's earlier warning that "each of us sees of them those only he himself is adapted to seeing" (p. 8). It is unsurprising that the spirits Rudolph witnesses were previously mentioned in Professor Spence's history of the Picts, the pretty American's erasure of pre-colonial spirits, and in his own bedtime story.

These are evidently the ghosts that Rudolph expects to see, but the cultural specifics of the ghost who aids in his escape suggests the type he needed to see. In classic horror

form, our protagonist is rescued just before he is sacrificed by "a man in sixteenth−century costume" (p. 12) who tells Rudolph to "show them Iron!" (p. 12). Rudolph takes out his knife and, "At sight of the cold steel, which no ghost or troll or imp can endure to behold, the [ghosts fell] back, muttering" (p. 12). If we assume that the spirits' manifestation is a projection of Rudolph's mind, then his choice of hero and weapon are telling because they perpetuate the theme of toxic nostalgia. Steel is of course alien to spirits from the Bronze and Iron Ages, and so their fear of the metal is seemingly drawn from Rudolph's own cultural context. As Ainissa Ramirez explains, steel came to symbolize Victorian technological innovation and colonial might after Henry Bessemer—spurred by the need for cannons in the Crimean War—innovated a new method to produce strong steel in larger and cheaper quantities; this created a boom in manufacturing and allowed for the tens of thousands of miles of railway that facilitated Britain's imperial expansion (Ramirez 2016, pp. 12–13). With this context in mind, Rudolph's "cold steel" comes to symbolize his culture's technological superiority and capacity for colonial violence. That the spirits cannot "endure to behold" the material suggests their comparative physical and psychological inferiority.

This scene demonstrates Allen's reconfiguring of folk horror as a proxy for the imperial Gothic. The Indigenous-coded ghosts would not recognize steel historically, but they might recognize the threat of a British man dressed in sixteenth-century costume.[19] Notably, Allen was raised on Wolfe Island just outside Kingston, Ontario, the traditional territory of the Haudenosaunee and Anishinaabe. As Elizabeth Nelson and Anne Godlewska write, Kingston is in many ways "an epicentre for colonial history" (Nelson and Godlewska 2022, p. 668). It was Canada's first capital, and home to future prime minister John A. Macdonald (the architect of residential schools) when Allen was born in 1848. Wolfe Island also shares a channel with Fort Henry, a military post where the British Army was garrisoned until Queen Victoria's troops were pulled out of Canada in 1870. The Canadian militia then took up residence until 1891 (Fort Henry n.d.). We suggest that Rudolph's rescuer evokes the author's upbringing in Canada's "epicentre" of colonial history and reflects his exposure to imperial violence as embodied by the British Army officers who populated his rural community. Certainly, Allen's upbringing on the outskirts of empire explains the curious melding of European and North American histories that occupy Rudolph's mind as an Englishman written by a colonial (Canadian) subject. Though Allen never experienced imperial violence firsthand, the sixteenth-century ghost indicates his understanding that the symbolic presence of weaponized European invaders unites white oppressors across the empire regardless of their differing nationalities or social status. Rudolph's steel blade evidences an untouchably advanced culture and so disproves the spirits' accusations of his primitiveness ("Mu–mu–mu–moo!"). His escape exemplifies how national histories, like Britain's legacy of colonialism, might be recast as something vanglorious by means of toxic nostalgia.

The spirits here do not accurately reflect any history or culture. Rather, they are an amalgamation of racialized Others who serve to reaffirm Rudolph's nationalized sense of masculine authority and erase his fears of Britain's cultural degeneration. The violence in the cave scene reminds us how, as Smith explains, fear often gives way to a desire "to dominate, or exterminate" the threat: "the solution to the problem of humanity also turns out to be a solution to the problem of monstrosity" (p. 250). If the monster is that which "subvert[s] the natural order," then to defeat the monster is reinstate that same natural order (or the status quo). Rudolph escapes the monsters' grasps and eludes ritual sacrifice. His natural order is restored upon return to the manor and to the domestic civilities of the modern world. He returns the manor battered and bloody, but victorious: his soft "poet's mind" is galvanized by the thrill of conquest.

4. Gothic Ghost Stories and Gendered Epistemologies

By its conclusion, "Pallinghurst Barrow" reads as both an endorsement and complication of Wallace's spiritualism. There is no further mention of Rudolph's wound, that "blood of this world" (p. 12), after his escape. The story ends with him recovering from what the other guests assume is "brain fever" (p. 13), and young Joyce at his bedside (upon his request) to help make sense of his misadventure. Instead of bloody material proof, the story offers Joyce as witness. She tells Rudolph that she saw him follow the lights in the barrow, and that she interpreted their sinister meaning. "I saw the fires on the moor burn brighter and bluer: and then I remembered the words of a terrible old rhyme [Rachel] taught me—" (p. 13), which she recites:

> Pallinghurst Barrow—Pallinghurst Barrow!
>
> Every year one heart thou'lt harrow!
>
> Pallinghurst Ring—Pallinghurst Ring!
>
> A bloody man is thy ghostly king.
>
> Men's bones he breaks, and sucks their marrow
>
> In Pallinghurst Ring on Pallinghurst Barrow (p. 13)

Joyce's song about a cannibalistic ghost king who haunts the barrow seemingly confirms through its specificity that Rudolph's experience was real and has even happened before. This scene—more specifically, Joyce—returns us to Wallace as a leading advocate of witness testimony for evidence of the spiritual. Wallace created the Society of Psychical Research in 1891 to legitimize his efforts in the field and pursue possible means of scientific verification.[20] According to Morton, Allen was not only "aware of the current labors of the Society for Psychical Research, which was investigating 'crisis apparitions' for its first big book, *Phantasms of the Living*," but he also delighted in mocking the Society for its investigative methods (p. 113). Allen parodied the pompous style contributors used when sharing their ghost sightings with the Society; he was critical of their testimony, and the elitism that often biased the selection of alleged witnesses (p. 113). As Morton explains, "the founders of the Society suffered from the fatally ingenuous belief that 'evidences' from upstanding people like judges, civil servants, and academics ought usually to be taken at face value" (Morton 2005, p. 113). By concluding his story with Joyce, Allen offers a slightly different satire of the Society and its founder in their pursuit of spiritual verification. Rather than hard evidence which may never come, Allen presents storytelling by everyday people, like Joyce and Rachel, as its own kind of spiritual reality.

Moreover, Joyce's narrative importance reflects the centrality of women and girls in the folk horror tradition as well as the gendered history of scientific opposition to the supernatural. We can trace this connection between genre and gender to the emergence of the Gothic in the eighteenth century and its quick association with "women writers and readers" (Spooner 2019, p. 129). As Ellen Brinks argues, gender is essential to the Gothic form via plots that centre patriarchal traditions, such as marriage and inheritance, as a crisis point for masculinity (p. 15). "Dispossessed masculinity raises an insidious question regarding the basis of gendered identity," Brinks writes (Brinks 2003, p. 12). "[I]f a male subject can be inhabited, displaced, or self-alienated, even temporarily, by uncanny forces that unleash, precipitate or coincide with effeminizing effects, in what sense does he possess a masculine identity?" (p. 12). Brink's assessment of men's feminization in the Gothic due to displacement and alienation certainly recalls Rudolph's capture at the hands of the uncanny spirits. However, Rudolph begins the story effeminized by his "poet's soul" and distaste for modern industry. He has more in common with the femme Byronic heroes of the Romantic Gothic than the hyper-masculine men of the imperial age. Rudolph even monitors his masculinity by admonishing himself for "los[ing] all self-control for

the moment" and running like a "schoolgirl" from the barrow after becoming aware of the watchers (p. 4). When reminded of the incident, he blushes: "Rudolph coloured up slightly; 'twas a girlish trick, unworthy of a journalist; but he still had it" (p. 5). Rudolph's adventure restores his masculinity, but it is tempered by his need for young Joyce to confirm the legitimacy of his experience. Allen's satire of spiritualism is likewise a satire of *fin-de-siècle* Gothic stories in which the male hero's masculinity is dependent upon eradicating or dominating the feminine/racialized subject. With "Pallinghurst Barrow," Allen foregrounds the racialized and feminized perspective of "old Rachel, the gipsy" as told to Joyce and received by Rudolph. The ending synthesizes the Gothic arc of masculine reclamation with the affective power of storytelling as its own form of cultural authority for groups excluded from institutionalized power.

The masculine denigration of spiritualism and storytelling as frivolous, feminine pursuits reaches back to the early days of the ghost story circle. Joseph Addison's "Spectator no. 12" (14 March 1711) exemplifies this aversion toward "Womens [sic] Fables" (qtd. in Clery 1995, p. 3). One night, a "taciturn but observant Mr Spectator" interrupts his Landlady's daughter entertaining a group of girlfriends with ghost stories: "As one Spirit raised another, I observed that at the End of every Story the whole Company closed their Ranks and crouded about the Fire" (qtd. in Clery 1995, p. 3). Mr Spectator, himself enraptured but pretending to read a book, happens to "Notice . . . a little Boy, who was so attentive to every Story, that I am mistaken if he ventures to go to bed by himself this Twelvemonth," adding that the girls "talked so long, that the Imaginations of the whole Assembly were manifestly crazed, and I am sure will be the worse for it as long as they live" (p. 3). Mr Spectator quickly retires to his room after being caught eavesdropping, but "not without wondering at the unaccountable Weakness in reasonable Creatures, that they should love to astonish and terrify one another" (p. 3). Clery notes the irony in this closing reference to "reasonable creatures" by pointing to the narrator's obvious identification with the little boy who likewise listens to and is scared ("grown paler") by the ghost stories (p. 3). For Clery, this scene demonstrates the faculty of superstition to bond listeners within the intimate story-telling circle. "The group seems to represent an order of society which achieves cohesion through its myths, a circle bound and tightened by the shared sensations of fascination and terror" (p. 3). The girls are spoken of as a unit who "close their Ranks" against terror, whereas Mr Spectator is a solitary figure whose pretence of indifference perhaps exacerbates his fear because it has no communal outlet for catharsis. His feigned "anonymity and unconvincing display of detached authority" merely draws attention to "the emptiness and isolation of rational judgement" (p. 4). The short story emphasizes that the perspective of ghost stories as a feminine "Weakness" cannot account for their universality and potency.

Addison's story models the gendered nature of both folk horror and ghost story-telling tradition in that it is here associated with women and girls, denigrated by masculinized rationality, and yet evidently effective for all attuned listeners. Published nearly two centuries later, Allen's folk horror encourages us to consider why we are still drawn to such ghost stories as a spiritual alternative, if not challenge, to reason or science. Moreover, his tale invites us to consider the role of women and girls in disseminating culture outside the gendered parameters of institutionalized knowledge. Contrary to male-dominated fields of professional science and Victorian medicine, spiritualism and the Occult provided women an alternative space where their gender was not only accepted, but even considered an asset or means to authority.[21] Many men within the *fin-de-siècle* scientific community viewed spiritualism as evidence of a "diseased mind" run amuck (*The Darkened Room*, Owen 1990, p. 139), the antithesis of rational thinking.[22] In an effort to be taken seriously, or out of sincere belief, Victorian spiritualists (including female mediums) thus adopted

materialist terminology to support their practices.[23] Alex Owen explains that many of these "believers hoped that a scientific epistemology would verify the materiality of the unseen world whilst at the same time exposing the paucity of a militant scientism which espoused a barren materialist philosophy" (Owen, Introduction 7).[24] In her own work on this history, Massicotte considers how spiritualists often described their work in terms that "conflated the female body with technologies of communications to explain spiritual intercourse through the popular imagination of the telegraph, which similarly allowed for invisible transmissions across vast distances" (Massicotte 2017, p. 39).[25] In short, spiritualism formed an alternative route to scientific authority for women by presenting the ambiguous and interpretive female body as a substitute for positivist forms of material evidence.

This late-Victorian cultural assumption of the female body as a passive vessel was reinforced by Patrick Geddes and J. Arthur Thomson's monograph *The Evolution of Sex* (Geddes and Thomson 1889), in which Darwin's animal science is used to "naturalize" theories of gender difference.[26] *The Evolution of Sex* was published as the first volume in Havelock Ellis's "Contemporary Science Series," which as Lucy Bland notes, would have "render[ed] the book cheap and easy to obtain" (Bland 1998, p. 12). In fact, *The Evolution of Sex* was, as Bland continues, "a best-seller, hugely popular among scientists and social commentators of the day" (p. 12).[27] These sexual scientists (or emergent sexologists) were thus influenced by Geddes and Thomson's claim that gendered behaviour can be traced back to human reproduction sex cells.[28] *Evolution of Sex* begins with a description of sexual reproduction as effectively driven by the "katabolic or male sex [sperm]," which is to be repeatedly contrasted with "the quiet plainness as equally natural to the predominately anabolic females [egg]" (p. 29). The result is a theory of heteronormative gender difference (the passive egg complemented/penetrated by the active sperm) that is rooted in our animal DNA (or "essences", i.e., essentialism) and therefore a constant in human history.

Late-Victorian science, with its invocation of technological language, thus helped rationalize women as physiologically best-suited to work as mediums. Massicotte likewise acknowledges how gender roles and, specifically, assumptions about feminine embodiment were complicated by "the rise of the "New Woman" and the "Modern Girl" (p. 40). We see this tension between modes of femininity and the supernatural in Joyce's relationships with her mother, Mrs. Bouverie Barton, and nursemaid Rachel. Mrs. Bouverie Barton insists that Joyce give up her ghost stories because "superstitions never do any good to anyone" (p. 8), and such "worn-out" tales have no place with their scientifically minded guests (p. 6). Joyce's affirmation of Rudolph's experience, however, debunks Mrs. Bouverie Barton's claim that superstition is without merit to anyone. Rudolph is "relieved" that "there was somebody to whom he could talk freely of his terrible adventure" (13). Joyce's testimony confirms Rudolph's sense of reality, and their mutual belief in the barrow spirits creates an emotional bond between a despite the lack of material evidence to substantiate their surety. This conclusion to the story elevates Rachel's position within the narrative, as it is her dissemination of the local legend that fosters community amongst the house guests and between Joyce and Rudolph. Rudolph's initial ability to perceive the watchers certainly feminizes him as a passive receptor, though, his reliance on Joyce and Rachel's knowledge elevates their position in terms of narrative authority.

Rudolph's story begins with his burnout from the urban, masculine world of journalism and economics and ends with him embracing the feminized world of folk knowledge and storytelling. What "Pallinghurst Barrow" presents, then, is a critique of the modern imperative for objectivity and the masculine observer/scientist in favour of acknowledging storytelling and folk tradition as legitimate means of cultural study. It matters not whether Rudolph actually escaped from ghostly human sacrifice—what matters is that he believes he did. Joyce's acceptance of his experience presents an alternative epistemic mode that

positivist science, insistent on material evidence, precludes. Rudolph may overcome the Ghost King with the phallic steel knife and find inspiration in male colonial figures of the (imagined) past, but it is his knowledge of the legend through Joyce and old Rachel—and Joyce's words of affirmation—that facilitate his masculine resurrection. The effect is a melding of gendered perspectives rather than an endorsement of either materialism or spiritualism as exclusively the realms of men and women.

5. Conclusions

As it began, Grant Allen's "Pallinghurst Barrow" leaves us with a firm impression of the debate between the spiritualists and materialists. Dr. Porter makes his return, as he is among the houseguests who "picked [Rudolph] up the next day"—finding him "hot and cold, terribly pale from fear, and mumbling incoherently" (13). Upon seeing his patient to bed, "without a moment's delay," the doctor remarks, "Poor fellow! . . . he's had a very narrow escape indeed of a bad brain fever" (p. 13). Any hint of Rudolph's supernatural encounter is quickly displaced by the medical man's more rational reference to brain fever—not unlike the hallucinations of Nordau's Decadents and neo-mystics. In fact, Dr. Porter is so sure that Rudolph's "mumblings" are the effects of a drug-induced hallucination that he blames himself ("I oughtn't to have exhibited Cannabis in his excited condition") and also finds fault with his own scientific method ("or, at any rate, if I did, I ought at least, to have watched its effect" [p. 13]). Still, Dr. Porter's final prescription hints at another—and distinctly feminine—account of Rudolph's experience in Pallinghurst Barrow; as the doctor insists, Rudolph must be "kept very quiet now, and on no account whatever, Nurse, must either Mrs. Bruce or Mrs. Bouverie−Barton be allowed to come near him" (p. 13). Of course, Rudolph defies these orders by requesting the company of young Joyce, as if to drive home the point that spiritual recognition is both feminine and outside the purview of the medical man's authority.

Like Dr. Porter, Grant Allen himself was not a religious man. "Pallinghurst Barrow" presents an agnostic's understanding of the power of storytelling without religiosity to create and bind affective communities. This is particularly apt of ghost stories and their ability to linger. Joyce's concluding testimony affirms Rudolph's "escape" from the Ghost King (p. 13), but her words create more of a sense of "creep" than closure (to invoke Smith's sense of the term). Indeed, Joyce draws the reader into the ghost circle with the realization that the spirits are still out there, undefeated. As Smith reminds us, "dehumanizers conceive of those whom they dehumanize as simultaneously human and subhuman . . . they also think of them as creepy, horrifying, defiling, and this helps to explain why they are driven to dominate, or exterminate" (p. 250). Joyce's closing rhyme invokes the Ghost King's enduring threat of return, which we understand to have happened before Rudolph's adventure. The cycle mirrors the cultural persistence of the folktale as a means of perpetuating tradition and belief. Joyce confirms that she heard the "moaning on the moor, cries of despair, as from a great crowd cheated," and claims then to have known "that [Rudolph was] not to be the Ghost−King's victim" (p. 13). For this night, at least, Rudolph has escaped, but one cannot help but wonder whether the Ghost King is still out there? Be warned!

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Notes

[1] The title is an allusion to Hermes Trismeistus (Hermes the Thrice Great), a syncretic figure who would also inspire several late-nineteenth-century Occultists, including the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn (whose members included Y.B. Yeats, Aleister Crowley, Arthur Machen, and Algernon Blackwood).

[2] Wells's (2021) *Damnable Tales* is an excellent anthology of early nineteenth-century folk horror; it includes Allen's "Pallinghurst Barrow, among the titles we list in-text.

[3] C. M. Reid, for example, writes the theme of alienation ("Loss of community") as a key convention of the genre: "The erosion of traditional communities and social bonds creates a sense of alienation and vulnerability, which folk horror can exploit" (Reid 2025).

[4] For more on this idea of folk horror as digging into the layers of history, through the literal earth, see Kier-La Janisse's documentary *Woodlands Dark and Days Bewitched: A History of Folk Horror* (Janisse 2021), especially the interviews with Kier-La Janisse and Kat Ellinger at 26:35. Janisse explains how "the landscape has always been a key component in the English Ghost Story . . . Add to this idea of a bloody history that is buried beneath the façade of civility (27:11). Ellinger also explains how "folk horror very much channels people's relationship to the land, to this sort of shared consciousness. To these traditional beliefs that are somehow in the soil, in the landscape" (27:59).

[5] See, for example, Howard David Ingham et al.'s *We Don't Go Back* (2018) for more on this trope: "In pretty much every other example (except maybe *Blood on Satan's Claw*, now I come to think of it), you have progressive city folk or figures of authority facing off against conservative country folk following old ways" (p. 46).

[6] See Zipes (2000) for more on how the original wonder tales (from which fairy tales were derived) "could serve to stabilize, conserve, or challenge the common beliefs, laws, values, and norms of a group" (p. xix).

[7] Professor Spencer is a possible allusion to Herbert Spencer, a social scientist who was a personal friend and mentor of Allen's.

[8] See Deuerlein (2025), especially pages 56–57, for more on these prehistoric ghosts as the original Iberians ("'the last traditional memories of an historical race'"), who were subjugated by the Celts, and then the Anglo-Saxons, in turn. Citing Allen, Deuerlein explains how these "invaders learned 'the Celtic superstitions from their Welsh slaves', and at a time when all memory of the real Iberians had been lost, their stone hatchets became 'fairy axes', their tombs sacred sites" (p. 57).

[9] Wallace wrote an 1881 review of Allen's *Colour Sense* (1879), for example, in which he expressed particular admiration for Allen's accessible writing; but even prior to their exchange on science, Allen knew of Wallace's reputation as a defender of spiritualism. This appreciation for writing—or for literature and culture, more broadly—would continue to be a prominent theme Wallace's relationship with Allen. His review of Allen's *Vignettes From Nature* (1881), for example, praises Allen's ability to blend research (he seems "to have read and assimilated all the best works on the subject") with a "great power of description, a vivid imagination, and a charming style of writing, all of which are displayed in every page of his last work" (Wallace "Vignettes" np).

[10] At the same time, and on a more personal level, Allen was connected to Wallace through his father, Allen Sr., who hosted the elder scientist during his 1887 lecture tour in North America. It was also during this lecture (on "Darwinism," at Queen's College, Kingston) that Wallace obtained information allowing him to discredit his and Allen's shared rival, George Romanes. According to Forsdyke, Wallace was approached after the lecture by a local woman who had evidence of Romanes's dabblings in spiritualism: "A lady who was interested in spiritualism spoke to me, and asked me if I knew that Romanes was a spiritualist, and had tried to convert Darwin. [. . .] said she, 'Professor Romanes' brother is a great friend of mine, and he gave me the drafts of letters they jointly wrote to Darwin. Would you like to see them?' I said I most certainly should" (qtd. in Forsdyke 2004, np). Wallace's enthusiasm to see the letters can be explained by his own professional rivalry with Romanes. Since the 1880s, Romanes had been openly critical of Wallace's spiritualism, and so the Kingston lady's revelation gave Wallace a chance to expose his detractor's hypocrisy.

[11] See Noakes (2004) for more on this history.

[12] Still, critics today read such claims as Wallace's advocation for a version of other-worldly forces, or Spirits, who influence ("guide") the material world. Cremo (2003) makes this point in discussing the internal hierarchy of Wallace's spirit world. While the lower ghosts can penetrate the material realm of the humans ("acting through mediums"), the "more powerful spirits" are removed from the material and yet "may have played a role in the process of evolution, guiding it in certain directions" (p. 103). See also Malinchak (1987) and C. H. Smith (1992).

[13] Toward the end of his life, in an 1910 interview with Harold Begbie (for *The Daily Chronicle*, issues 3 and 4), Wallace was asked to elaborate on the "nature and character of the guidance which superintends the management of our bodies." Wallace replied, "I believe it to be the guidance of beings superior to us in power and intelligence. Call them spirits, angels, gods, what you will; the name is of no importance. I find this control in the lowest cell; the wonderful activity of cells convinces me that it is guided by intelligence and consciousness. I cannot comprehend how any just and unprejudiced mind, fully aware of this amazing activity,

can persuade itself to believe that the whole thing is a blind and unintelligent accident. (*New Thoughts on Evolution*). In his reprint, Michael Flannery frames the above interview with Wallace as evidence of "intelligent evolution and a scathing indictment of materialism" (p. 145). See also Flannery's (2012) interview with *Science & Culture Today*, "Don't Mess With Alfred Russel Wallace."

14 It was Spencer who coined the phrase "survival of the fittest," which Darwin later added to the fifth edition of *Origin of Species* upon Wallace's advice. See *The Darwin Correspondence Project* definition of this term, which also includes a discussion of this correspondence between Wallace and Darwin: "Alfred Russel Wallace, whose own theory about the mechanics of evolution was almost identical to Darwin's, wrote to Darwin in 1866 with a lengthy criticism of Darwin's term 'natural selection' and pleaded with him to minimise [sic] confusion by adopting 'Survival of the fittest'" (The Darwin Correspondence Project n.d.).

15 "Manners and Fashion" (1854) was originally published for the *Westminster Review* and later reprinted in *Essays* (Spencer 1891).

16 See, for example, the *Encyclopedia.com* entry on "Manism." (Encyclopedia.com 2025).

17 See Patrick Brantlinger's *Rule of Darkness* (Brantlinger 1988) for more on specific historical events, from the 1857 Indian Rebellion to the Boers Wars, which culminated in this sense of Imperial decline.

18 Keetley and Heholt also cite Paul Newland on the rural as "anti-modern," "natural," and/or pagan landscape" (qtd. Keetley and Heholt 2023, p. 21).

19 Sir Walter Raleigh attempted to establish England's first colony in the Americas in 1585, but the settlement—Roanoke—failed and became its own site of folk legend (see Wood's "The Roanoke Colony" (Wood 2012) and "Lost Colony" (*Encyclopedia Britannica* 2025)).

20 See Martyn Jolly's online lecture, "Faces of the Living Dead" (Jolly 2002) for more on this history.

21 This is the point of Alex Owen's foundational study of *Women and the Victorian Occult* (1990): "Spiritualist culture held possibilities for attention, opportunity, and status denied [to women] elsewhere" (4). Not only did spiritualism provide women with "a means of circumventing rigid nineteenth-century class and gender norms," Owen continues, but "it did so without mounting a direct attack on the status quo" (p. 4). See also Andrzej Diniejko's post on "spiritualism" for *The Victorian Web*: "A female medium was often considered a better communicator than a male medium because she had allegedly a better predisposition to spiritual perfectability" (Diniejko 2016, np).

22 Nordau claims "to see in mysticism a principal characteristic of degeneration" (p. 45), citing examples from Pre-Raphaelites to Symbolism. His explanation is notable for its suggestion of gender (hysteria) associated with the mystic's supposed bodily dysregulation: "'Mystical thoughts are to be laid to the account of the insanity of the degenerate. There are two states in which they are observed—in epilepsy and in hysterical delirium'" (Legrain, qtd. in Nordau 1898, p. 45).

23 "Séance participants, for instance, generally claimed that the modalities of spiritual communications offered a scientific proof of the afterlife and that spiritual communications could advance objective knowledge of the soul" (Massicotte, *Trance Speakers* p. 30).

24 As Owen continues, in *The Darkened Room* (1990): "Spiritualists opposed what they regarded as the gross materialism of an age in which things of the spirit no longer had relevance, but proposed a new metaphysical cosmology based upon an (albeit rarefied) form of matter" (p. 18).

25 Massicotte cites work by Jeffrey Sconce on the language of technology and the gendered process of channeling (p. 39).

26 Like many Victorian thinkers of the time, Geddes and Thomson were eager to build upon Darwin's study on the animal origins of humans. They were especially keen to build upon Darwin's work on the role of "sexual selection" in this human history; see Bland (1998).

27 Four years later, Ellis recreated a similarly rigid structure of gender differences in his study of *Man and Woman* (1994), wherein feminine "docility and receptiveness" (p. 22) is compared with men's "restless energy" (p. 23).

28 For example, influenced by Geddes and Thomson, Ellis describes gender in terms of an innate or "an organic basis" (*Man and Woman*, Ellis 1998, p. 22). See also Bland (1998) for more on this intellectual history.

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