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Making Sense of Stigmata

How Victorians explained the Wounds of Christ

Abstract: Stigmata, the wounds of Christ crucified, experienced a dramatic rise in occurrences on nineteenth-century bodies across Europe, also in the British Isles. As allegedly supernatural manifestations of devotional enthusiasm, they complicated notions of an emerging science and a rationalising religion, and could even upset the fragile religious status quo. Because of this, so this article argues, Victorians adopted different ways of understanding and various strategies of dealing with stigmata. Stigmatics were subjected to priests' condemnations, doctors' diagnoses, and judges' verdicts. This article traces how the stigmata were present in the religious and cultural imagination of the Victorians, for whom the wounds of Christ provided a reason for discussions about what constituted their faith. Starting with the stigmatisation of John Thom in Canterbury on the eve of Victoria's coronation, and drawing on hagiographies, tabloid journalism, and correspondence between clergymen, physicians and authorities, this article emphasises the multiform manifestations and interpretations of the stigmata across British and Irish societies, from bodily signs of the Divine or the Devil and objects of popular devotion, to fraudulence, to hysteria and skin disease, and finally to symbols of socio-economic distress. Through an examination of the ambiguities within these ways of 'making sense' of stigmata, this article makes the case for a reevaluation of the religious supernatural in Victorian culture.

Keywords: stigmata; mysticism; religion; Catholicism; science; revival

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Making Sense of Stigmata:

How Victorians explained the Wounds of Christ

1. Holy Wounds in Ulster

In the summer of 1859 the fever of evangelical revivalism took Ulster, Ireland, by storm. It came with a wide variety of unusual phenomena—particularly affecting Presbyterians, who comprised the largest Protestant denomination in the region.¹ Presbyterian conversions went hand in hand with ‘convulsions, cries, uncontrollable weeping or trembling’, with trances, speaking in tongues, clairvoyance, and ecstasies.² Several new converts appeared in public showing distinctive marks on their hands, much like the puncture-wounds of Christ crucified. Though the stigmata generally appeared as *imitatio Christi*, other, more extravagant cases were observed, like the woman in Belfast who exhibited the words ‘Jesus’ and ‘Christ’ on her breasts, and ‘Come ye to the Lord’ on her forearm. She was ‘unmasked’ when someone pointed out that ‘Jesus’ was spelled ‘Jaesus’.³ Stigmata could take on many shapes: sometimes crude, sometimes elaborate, as for a thirteen-year-old girl in Kiltimagh, County Mayo, in 1910: her holy wounds resembled the letters ‘I.H.S.’ and ‘I.N.R.I’ around a crown of thorns and a cross.⁴

Immediately interpretations of the Ulster phenomena followed. Newspapers reduced the physical manifestations of revivalist enthusiasm to women’s susceptibility to fits of hysteria.⁵ The people exhibiting extravagant behaviour in the streets of Ulster were overwhelmingly

¹ Daniel Ritchie, ‘The 1859 Revival and its Enemies: Opposition to Religious Revivalism within Ulster Presbyterianism’, *Irish Historical Studies*, 40.157 (2016), 66-91 (p. 67).

² S.J. Brown, ‘Presbyterian communities, transatlantic visions and the Ulster revival of 1859’, in *The Cultures of Europe: the Irish Contribution*, ed. by James Patrick Mackey (Belfast: Institute of Irish Studies, 1994), pp. 87-108 (p. 94).

³ *Cork Daily Reporter*, 15 September 1859, p. 2.

⁴ *New York Times* (Dublin ed.), 19 November 1910, p. 3.

⁵ See, for example, *Belfast Daily Mercury*, 27 September 1859, p. 2.

female. Crowds gathered to see these ecstatic women in person, up close; during that feverish summer they became living shrines for revivalist devotion as well as popular tourist attractions.⁶ Functioning as personal evidence of the divine, they formed an integral part of the promotion of the revival as well as its controversy.⁷ For a brief period, the women in the revival wielded an authority derived from their personal bond with God: an authority that bypassed ecclesiastical hierarchy and allowed them to rise to (short-lived) positions of religious leadership and mystical ‘celebrity’. One testimony spoke of as many as 2,000 people gathering to visit one girl who displayed religious puncture-wounds.⁸ Physical manifestations of religious fervour spread from Ulster to Belfast, crossed, as David Bebbington shows, the North Channel together with Scottish laymen who had witnessed the revival, and spread to fishing villages on the Isles.⁹

However, the Ulster stigmatics also provided opponents with effective ammunition to discredit the revival itself. Their sensory, public displays of religious enthusiasm alienated many of the revivalists themselves.¹⁰ Because of the extravagant nature of the phenomenon, Victorian stigmatics like those in Ulster were dismissed by their contemporaries as fringe occurrences and situated outside a modernising and rationalising society that was, according to this narrative, shedding a past defined by ‘superstition’ and religious ‘exuberance’. This article traces the ways in which stigmatics were depicted as a function of that marginalisation: as criminals, ill people, or social stirrers; almost always as anachronisms in a modern age. Such depictions contributed to the paradigmatic conception of the nineteenth century as a watershed between the premodern and the modern. As this article shows, to be effective these narratives were forced to include an ever-increasing number of people: first the stigmatic, next their

⁶ Anon., *The Physical Phenomena of the Revival in the North of Ireland* (Dublin, 1859), p. 16.

⁷ Alexander McCann, *The ‘Strikings Down’, and ‘the Marks’, Vindicated* (Belfast, 1859), p. 15.

⁸ *Belfast Morning News*, 19 September 1859, p. 4.

⁹ David Bebbington, *Victorian Religious Revivals: Culture and Piety in Local and Global Contexts* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), pp. 111-167.

¹⁰ Ritchie, ‘The 1859 Revival and its Enemies’, pp. 70-71.

believers. This article argues that untangling and thematising the narrative strategies deployed to dismiss the stigmata provides an important insight into how Victorian elites attempted to shape their ‘modernity’ by contrasting it with exuberant, supernatural forms of religion.

The controversy surrounding popular stigmatics of Ulster is indicative of the tensions that surrounded Victorian (female) mystics in the British Isles. They provided anti-revivalists with ammunition to accuse the movement of a corrupted morality, a predisposition to overstated profanity or worse, ties to Mormonism.¹¹ Two books published in 1860 illustrate these tensions: William Gibson’s *The Year of Grace* and Isaac Nelson’s *The Year of Delusion*, a direct response to the former that led Gibson to omit most of his accounts on the ‘physical prostrations’ in the second edition of *The Year of Grace*.¹² Debates on how to make sense of stigmata were carried over into revival historiography: nineteenth-century historians spoke of them as God (or Satan) at work, as frauds, or as manifestations of individual and collective hysteria, and explained their appeal by addressing the gullibility of the local population—a gullibility harnessed by illiteracy, (spiritual) malnourishment, and poverty; a gullibility, moreover, judged to be at odds with the path of a rational modernity on which Victorian civilisation was considered to be.¹³ More than fifty years later the same connotations—‘Satan [...] at work as well as God’; ‘religious epilepsy’—still persisted.¹⁴

Mystical phenomena in general and stigmata in particular were seen as signs, symbols, or as a form of representation, as theorist of religion Jonathan Z. Smith calls it, a perspective equally dominant in perceptions of the body in the Victorian age.¹⁵ By ‘representation’ Smith

¹¹ Anon. *A Tract for the People on Revivalism and Mormonism* (Belfast, 1859), p. 3; cited in Ritchie, ‘The 1859 Revival and its Enemies’, p. 71.

¹² Myrtle Hill, ‘Assessing the Awakening: the 1859 Revival in Ulster’, in *Church and People in Britain and Scandinavia*, ed. by Ingmar Brohed (Lund: Lund University Press, 1996), pp. 197-214 (p. 202).

¹³ For a good example of each of these discourses: Rev. E. Hincks, *God’s Works and Satan’s Counter-works* (Belfast, 1859); Rev. J. Montgomery, *The Holy Spirit* (Belfast, 1859); McCann.

¹⁴ Frank Moore, *The Truth about Ulster* (London: E. Nash, 1914), pp. 190-194.

¹⁵ Jonathan Z. Smith, ‘A Twice-told Tale: the History of the History of Religion’s History’, in *Relating Religion: Essays in the Study of Religion* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2004), pp. 362-374. For a critique of the ‘representational approach’ to body history: Roger Cooter, ‘The Traffic in Victorian Bodies: Medicine, Literature, and History’, *Victorian Studies* 45.3 (2003), 513-527.

means the study of religious phenomena and practices through the prism of something different from what they signified for the practitioners and their devout followers.¹⁶ This approach enabled representations of these practices—in this case, stigmata—as a declining strain of so-called superstition or anti-modern irrationalism. Generally these perspectives neglected religious and devotional meanings for ‘ordinary’ people.¹⁷ In other words: the prism refracts. Representing supernatural phenomena as freak occurrences outside of and in contrast with ‘Victorian society’ resulted in framing them as symbols (or, rather, symptoms) of a criminal, psychopathological, or socio-economic reality; a ‘metaphorical infestation’.¹⁸ It is an infestation especially visible in the study of stigmata, themselves often seen as symbolical metaphor also in scholarship.

Outside Britain and Ireland, since the 1990s historians have turned to the reception, promotion of, and response to (Catholic) stigmatics by ‘ordinary people’. To name but a few works of note: Paula Kane’s study explored how the stigmatic Sister Thorn inspired a popular devotional culture in early twentieth-century America; Tine Van Osselaer’s article contributed to an understanding of the material and devotional cultures surrounding stigmatics in Belgium and Germany; Nicole Priesching’s work recovered the significance of the Tyrolean ecstatic Maria von Mörl within the context of an ultramontanist piety that emphasised Papal authority; and Andrea Graus examined the impact of visiting a stigmatic in Spain and France.¹⁹ For the British Isles, recent works have begun to move away from discourse and institutional religion toward ‘religion as lived’, excavating popular religious beliefs, devotional, material and

¹⁶ Smith, p. 366.

¹⁷ Smith; Mary Heimann, *Catholic Devotion in Victorian England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995).

¹⁸ Cooter, p. 517.

¹⁹ Paula Kane, *Sister Thorn and Catholic Mysticism in Modern America* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2013); Tine Van Osselaer, ‘Stigmatic Women in Modern Europe. An Exploratory Note on Gender, Corporeality and Catholic Culture’, in *Evolutions et Transformations du Mariage dans le Christianisme*, ed. by M. Mazoyer and P. Mirault (Paris: L’Harmattan, 2016), pp. 269-289; Nichole Priesching, *Maria von Mörl (1812-1868). Leben und Bedeutung einer ‘Stigmatisierten Jungfrau’ aus Tirol im Kontext ultramontaner Frömmigkeit* (Brixen: A. Weger, 2004); Andrea Graus, ‘A Visit to Remember: Stigmata and Celebrity at the Turn of the Twentieth Century’, *Cultural and Social History*, 14.1 (2017), 55-72.

emotional practices, and the appeal of supernatural phenomena, frequently traversing denominational boundaries.²⁰ A similar urge to force cultural studies out of their somatic cocoon, away from ‘expert’ discourses and medical debates, has been nascent for some time in the study of, for example, Victorian spiritualism.²¹ These works lay out a vibrant and heterodox landscape, in which the supernatural continues to wield a social and cultural power fundamentally at odds with the narrative of nineteenth-century modernity.

But studies on British and Irish stigmatics—and, by extension, on the religious supernatural—have been rare, and have remained focused on the medical and ecclesiastical enquiries of the holy wounds, not on their cultural significance. Stigmatics, however can also be studied as a social phenomenon, grounded in a cultural reality where their existence is not determined solely by the (in)authenticity of their wounds, but also by their perceived outdated ‘otherness’ within Victorian society and the meanings attributed to them by their own communities. By tracing how contemporaries made sense of the stigmata, the people who suffered them, and the people who flocked to the sufferers, this article suggests a way in which Victorian stigmatics can be written back into the fabric of their own culture and, in turn, can problematise how that ‘modern’, ‘rational’ culture has been defined by the discourses that banished supernatural religious phenomena to its fringes.

2. God at Work. Divine, mystical Wounds

²⁰ For example: Heimann, *Catholic Devotion*; Carmen Mangion, *Contested Identities: Catholic Women Religious in Nineteenth-century England and Wales* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2008). On popular forms of sanctity: Gareth Atkins, *Making and Remaking Saints in Nineteenth-century Britain* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2016). For an expansive analysis of religious phenomena within Protestantism: Ann Taves, *Fits, Trances, and Visions. Experiencing Religion and Explaining Experience from Wesley to James* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999).

²¹ For example: Alex Owen, *The Darkened Room: Women, Power and Spiritualism in late Victorian Britain* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1989); Janet Oppenheim, *The Other World: Spiritualism and Psychical Research in England, 1850-1914* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985); Simone Natale, *Supernatural Entertainments: Victorian Spiritualism and the Rise of Modern Media Culture* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2016).

Even before the Ulster revival cooled down and the Irish stigmatics either retired or were exposed as frauds, the fever sparked animated debates about the ‘physical prostrations’. Were they visible evidence of revitalised religiosity or were they the devil’s games?²² Hundreds of pamphlets were published in 1859 and 1860 to convey the ‘sense of urgency and drama’, which depicted stigmatic women as (tangible) nuclei of popular devotion or propaganda tools for spreading the revival while concentrating on the wounds’ alleged (in)authenticity.²³ Such powerful symbols, visited also by lay people, upset the fragile religious status quo in the British Isles. The revivalists’ emphasis on suffering and repentance blurred boundaries between Anglican, Catholic, and Evangelical religious cultures. In fact, stigmata in the British Isles complicated denominational differentiation. Stigmatics appeared in the English industrial centres with a large Catholic population, like in Birmingham and Leeds, but Evangelical Presbyterians like in Ulster and other Nonconformist groups likewise witnessed distinctly ‘Catholic’ manifestations. Others even operated wholly outside any established denomination.

As a very visible form of suffering stigmata made explicit a tension between the inherently abject body and the Word of God made physical (literally, in the case of ‘Jaesus’). The wounds were a visceral and effective iconography of flesh and blood and, moreover and just as problematic, borne by public women.²⁴ Among Anglicans and Nonconformist churches there existed the fear that the stigmata would catholicise local religious practices and church communities. As a phenomenon of a particularly sensory nature—ecstatic suffering to be experienced from up close—the stigmata were, as critics eagerly pointed out, rather more illustrative of the Roman Catholic Church: ‘Protestantism wants no impostures, no bleeding

²² The matter of the divine or diabolical origins of stigmata predated the nineteenth century. Otto Weiss, ‘Stigmata’, in *‘Wahre’ und ‘falsche’ Heiligkeit. Mystik, Macht und Geschlechterrollen im Katholizismus des 19. Jahrhunderts*, ed. by Hubert Wolf (München: Oldenbourg, 2013), pp. 111-125 (p. 124). A third possible explanation for the stigmata that had existed since the early modern era was an ‘illness of the soul’.

²³ Hill, p. 198.

²⁴ On the particular challenges for women in religion, see for instance Carol Engelhardt Herringer, *Victorians and the Virgin Mary. Religion and Gender in England, 1830-85* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2008).

statues or winking pictures, no ecstasies or stigmata,’ *The Belfast News-Letter* warned, ‘Let us leave these wretched deceits for Romanism’.²⁵ The stigmata could pave the road for further popery. That suspicion was not unfounded. The final verdict on a scandal in the Magdalene asylum of Youghal (near Cork) sixteen years earlier had reduced the stigmata of three young women to ‘Romanist imposition’.²⁶ Upon including the whole European continent in our panorama of stigmatics, it becomes apparent that an overwhelming majority of suffering mystics were firmly rooted in Catholic cultures: stigmatics were predominantly found in the Italian and French countryside, in Spanish and German villages, in the Belgian *plat pays*, in the Tyrolean hill-lands.²⁷ Across Europe, this was a ‘golden age of stigmatics’.²⁸

In 1873 the French doctor Antoine Imbert-Gourbeyre published his two-volume standard work *Les stigmatisées*, in which he mentioned 321 stigmatic women from history. Overwhelmingly, they hailed from the continent and were Catholic, also in the nineteenth century. Studies on stigmata in modern Europe have likewise studied the phenomenon from within a Catholic context, to explore predominantly Catholic dynamics, devotion, and mysticism.²⁹ It is no coincidence that the British stigmatic most written about by historians is the Catholic schoolteacher Teresa Higginson (1844-1905) from Liverpool.³⁰ There was no (Catholic) consensus on Higginson’s stigmata during her lifetime, and as Mary Heimann’s account of the campaign for Higginson’s beatification in the 1920s and 1930s shows, that

²⁵ *Belfast News-Letter*, 14 September 1859, p. 2.

²⁶ ‘Romanist Impositions at Youghal; or, the Revival of Popish Miracles’, *Churchman* (London: William Edward Painter, 1843), pp. 462-467.

²⁷ Antoine Imbert-Gourbeyre, *La Stigmatisation, l’Extase Divine et les Miracles de Lourdes. Réponse aux Libres-Penseurs*, vol.1 (Paris: Clermont-Ferrand, 1894), p. 571; Joachim Boufflet, *Les Stigmatisés* (Paris: Cerf, 1996), p. 21.

²⁸ Van Osselaer, p. 270.

²⁹ Van Osselaer; Kane; Luca Sandoni, ‘Political Mobilizations of Ecstatic Experiences in late Nineteenth-century Catholic France: the Case of Doctor Antoine Imbert-Gourbeyre and his “Stigmatisées” (1868-73)’, *Disputatio Philosophica*, 16 (2014), 19-40.

³⁰ Antoine Imbert-Gourbeyre, *Les Stigmatisées*, 2 vol. (Paris: Clermont-Ferrand, 1873); Herbert Thurston, *The Physical Phenomena of Mysticism* (London: Burns Oates, 1952); John Davies, ‘Traditional Religion, Popular Piety or Base Superstition? The Cause for the Beatification of Teresa Higginson’, *Recusant History* (1996-7), 123-144; Mary Heimann, ‘Mysticism in Bootle. Victorian Supernaturalism as an Historical Problem’, *The Journal of Ecclesiastical History*, 64.2 (2013), 335-356.

consensus remained out of reach after her death, resulting in historical amnesia for decades after the Second World War.³¹

The stigmata gave British and Irish Catholics reason for discussion about what constituted their faith, but the Presbyterian ‘Ulster cases’ show that other denominations were not unmoved by the appearance of the wounds. Clerical authorities in Ulster quickly stepped in to dismiss these phenomena and insisted ‘that the spectacular aspect of the awakening was completely bogus. They totally rejected the authenticity of the supposed miracles, trances, stigmata and visions [...] and any suggestions that the prostrations and convulsions were the work of the Holy Spirit’, and reduced them to ‘effects of excitement [...] and exaggeration’.³² If much of the contemporary literature focused on the presumed divinity of the phenomenon, the logical consequence is that the focus lay on those theological debates raging around the stigmatics rather than on the stigmatics themselves. The literature on these mystics—in particular the Catholic Teresa Higginson—reflects that focus: as in continental Europe, publications were overwhelmingly biographical and hagiographical in nature, even when they were presented as encyclopaedic, like Imbert-Gourbeyre’s *Les stigmatisées*.³³ Biographies and hagiographies on the continent served a particular purpose: to promote the stigmatic’s cause for sanctity within the Catholic Church and its institutions. Not all Victorian stigmatics were Catholic, but the biographical genre was popular enough to extend into secular publications. Indeed, the Victorian age’s romantic fascination with strong individuals manifested itself in ‘personality cults’ centred around historical figures like the Anglican saint King Charles I and contemporary imperial heroes like Livingstone and the saintly soldiers who fought in the Krim,

³¹ Heimann, ‘Mysticism in Bootle’, p. 348; Mary Heimann, ‘Medical and Mystical Opinion in British Catholicism: the Contentious Case of Teresa Higginson’, in *Sign or Symptom? Exceptional Corporeal Phenomena in Religion and Medicine in the 19th and 20th Centuries*, edited by Tine Van Osselaer, Henk De Smaele and Kaat Wils (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2017), pp. 75-100.

³² Ritchie, ‘The 1859 Revival and its Enemies’, p. 69; Rev. John Edgar, *Temperance and Revival in Ulster* (Belfast, 1861), p. 26.

³³ Sandoni, pp. 19-20; Van Osselaer, p. 269.

and even Queen Victoria herself. As a popular genre largely uncritical of its subjects, biographies were also used to write about Victorian mystics, if necessary by the mystics themselves. The flamboyant stigmatised revolutionary John Thom (1799-1838), who died one month before Victoria's coronation, published his 'autobiographical newspaper' *The Lion* in Canterbury as an explicit vehicle for the promotion of his political programme, but also as an instrument to assert his religious, even divine authority.³⁴

The appeal of such modern mystics was further reinforced by another popular genre that emerged in the nineteenth century: investigative tabloid journalism. In the 1870s the journalist Charles Maurice Davies went 'sect-hunting' and showed—or conjured up: the authenticity of his journalism was contested—a metropolis brimming with phrenologists, mesmerists, spiritualists, preachers, suffragettes, trance speakers, ventriloquists, child prostitutes, and the occasional stigmatic. His columns for the *Daily Telegraph* were bundled in *Unorthodox London* (1873) and *Mystic London* (1875). In such works, too, the focus was on the person of the mystic. Journalists closely followed controversial stigmatics: the millenarian prophetess Mary Ann Girling (1827-1886) was given a chapter in Davies' *Unorthodox London*. When she moved her following to the New Forest, known as a hotbed of religious and other dissent, local and national newspapers reported continuously—almost weekly—about her trials and tribulations until her death in 1886.³⁵

The tendency for a hagiological approach persisted into the twentieth century. When the cause for Teresa Higginson's beatification was taken up in the 1920s, hagiographies were published to promote her cause—and they left out some inconvenient truths, as pointed out by the Jesuit scholar of the supernatural Herbert Thurston in his correspondence with the

³⁴ *Lion*, 27 April 1833.

³⁵ Janet Rose, "'The Woman who Claimed to be Christ": The Millennial Belief of Mary Ann Girling and her Disciples (1860-1886)' (unpublished doctoral thesis, Oxford University, 2007), pp. 117-131.

neurologist F.M.R. Walshe).³⁶ They minimised Higginson's stigmata as holy wounds were not considered a reason for beatification or sanctification by the Vatican and, furthermore, Higginson's wounds remained hotly debated. For some campaigners the stigmata were proof of her divinity and, by consequence, of her sanctity; for others they were embarrassing signs of mental disease and insanity, and only discredited the campaign for ecclesiastical recognition. Such notions were eagerly adopted in 'modern' Victorian discourse.

3. Sanity and Sanctity

In the Victorian age '[s]ins became crimes; crimes, diseases; diseases, social problems', wrote Peter Gay.³⁷ Stigmata were observed as divine symbols, but also as signs of spiritual *un-ease*. In the nineteenth century, they were increasingly interpreted as signs of *dis-ease*, both mentally and socially. The body and its holy wounds came to be described not as the interface for (wo)man and God, but as a scratched and scarred surface covering an underlying unbalance. In that light the nineteenth century can be considered not so much an age of disenchantment, but rather of a rationalisation of existing, popular 'enchantments'.³⁸ In the British Isles this was a century of the churches repositioning themselves within society and of religious mass-revivals, but also of mesmerist and phrenologist scientists, of spiritualism and the occult, the supernatural and the Gothic. Victorian supernatural manifestations were then not viewed as a reaction against a sensed disenchantment, or even as a way of clinging to spiritual immortality, but could instead be presented as manifestations of a renewed empiricism. Knowledge was derived from direct

³⁶ London, Archive of the Jesuits in Britain, 39.3.5.3. On the campaign for Higginson's beatification: Heimann, 'Medical and Mystical Opinion', p. 86 *et passim*.

³⁷ Peter Gay, *The Bourgeois Experience: from Victoria to Freud* (New York: Norton, 1993), p. 213.

³⁸ See, for example: Jason Josephson-Storm, *The Myth of Disenchantment: Magic, Modernity, and the Birth of the Human Sciences* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017).

observation rather than faith, also with regards to the modern mystic.³⁹ The popularity of spiritualism, as Elana Gomel phrased it, ‘was only an exaggeration of a general nineteenth-century trend: the quest for the science of the supernatural... the modern concept of the supernatural is a by-product of scientific empiricism.’⁴⁰

That quest meant that the Victorian supernatural was fitted into a positivistic corset. (That corset did not diminish the British appetite for spirituality and wonder, quite the opposite.) The emergence of sciences like neurology and psychology meant that miracle-workers and mystics were framed within a pathology. At the same time the categorisation of the supernatural served to present these phenomena as unfit for what was imagined as a consenting, modernising culture shedding its ‘premodern’ characteristics in the nineteenth century. In this representation, as modernity advanced the supernatural declined. Historians’ appreciation of this formulation as a ‘consciously constructed ideological discourse’ came only slowly.⁴¹ In the creation of a pathology for the supernatural, the body became the primary locus for moral and social health; stigmata were then observed either as calculated charlatanism (‘crime’), symptom of an underlying affliction (‘disease’), or indicator of an ill society (‘social problem’).

3.1. Crime

The entrance into the debates of sceptical ‘experts’ resulted in a polarisation in which prostrations were either seen as pathological ‘holiness’ or as psychological side effects. From the focus on the (in)authenticity of the wounds, it was a natural evolution to consider unholy

³⁹ Tatiana Kontou and Sarah Willburn, ‘Introduction’, in *The Ashgate Research Companion to Nineteenth-century Spiritualism and the Occult*, ed. by Tatiana Kontou and Sarah Willburn (Abingdon: Routledge, 2016), p. 3.

⁴⁰ Elana Gomel, “‘Spirits in the Material World’: Spiritualism and Identity in the *Fin de Siècle*”, *Victorian Literature and Culture*, 35 (2007), 189-213 (pp.194-195).

⁴¹ For the persistence of this notion in relation to nineteenth-century magic, see: Karl Bell, *The Magical Imagination: Magic and Modernity in Urban England, 1780-1914* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

motives behind the phenomenon. Many of the pamphlets appearing at the time of the ‘Ulster case’, for example, attempted to prove the counterfeit nature of the stigmata by laying bare the monetary motives behind their appearance: simply to make money in some cases; in others the promotion of a stigmatic was viewed as a cunning marketing tool to stimulate the local tourist industry. Some Irish stigmatics linked to the 1859 revival were ‘exposed’ as con artists and robbed of any divine authority. The anonymous woman in Belfast who was unmasked because of the word ‘Jaesus’ on her breasts, so the newspapers were eager to point out, managed to accrue 115 shillings in one day from curious visitors.⁴²

Mary Ann Girling, the stigmatic in Davies’ *Unorthodox London*, would charge for her spectacular sermons under the railway arches of London. As with other supernatural phenomena, the financial element provided critics with an easy argument against the veracity of the wounds. ‘Exposed’ fraudulent stigmatics could be called to court on charge of such misconduct, as in Girling’s case. Simultaneously, strategies for monetary gain were considered irreconcilable with the presumed divine nature of the wounds and therefore a valid reason to dismiss such cases altogether. Once such accusations had arisen they persisted. Girling’s already dubious reputation was further tarnished and would follow her from London to Hampshire. In the discussions about Higginson in the 1930s, the neurologist Walshe wrote to Herbert Thurston of the deceitful nature of many stigmatics, alluding to how mystic symptoms would cease once the ‘audience’ had left the room.⁴³

3.2. Disease

Not all stigmatics were considered malignant frauds. The ‘physical prostrations’ in Ulster were considered to be a manifestation of weak will and a particular psychological disposition more often

⁴² *Northern Whig*, 13 September 1859, p. 4.

⁴³ F.M.R. Walshe, ‘Stigmata—Comments and a reply’, *Catholic Medical Guardian*, 16 (1938), 165.

than ill will. From the moment they emerged in public, the Ulster stigmatics were diagnosed with hysteria. The contagious nature of this mental ‘disease’ was evident in the expansive radius of the phenomenon. Not only was the ‘Ulster case’ an example of a group outbreak of physical prostrations, but when it started to spread, first to Belfast and the surrounding towns, it was clear to critics that stigmatisation was akin to a ‘raging epidemic’.⁴⁴

Victorian Britain (and Ireland) was the location of turf battles between competing disciplines, aggressive and ambitious. These sciences were embroiled in acrimonious quarrels to establish new boundaries in society. Physicians, quacks and mesmerists, spiritualists, mediums and magicians—all vied for a public stage on which to consolidate their authority. These battles were fought in newspapers, in medical journals like *Lancet* and the *Journal of Medical Science*, and sometimes on an actual stage. In these battles femininity was equated with a lack of self-control and a susceptibility to mystical experience and all kinds of prostrations: the medical, the supernatural, and the religious were irrevocably intertwined.⁴⁵ By the time of the Ulster revival hysteria might no longer have been the ‘female malady’ that originated from the womb, as it had been in the eighteenth century, but religious fervour—whether displayed through ecstatic trances or stigmata—was considered to be particularly enthralling to women.⁴⁶ Thus, through that connection of religious excess and womanhood, hysteria remained a predominantly gendered disease in Britain and Ireland.

A pathology of supernatural phenomena had two purposes: to assert the authority of natural sciences—over the churches as well as over each other—and to prove that extensive religiosity could harm one’s psychological health and, in extremis, one’s physical health. From this view, stigmatic wounds were particularly harmful manifestations of a psychological

⁴⁴ *Southern Reporter and Cork Commercial Courier*, 15 September 1859, p. 2.

⁴⁵ Carol Margaret Davison, ‘The Victorian Gothic and Gender’, in *The Victorian Gothic*, ed. by Andrew Smith and William Hughes (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2012), pp. 124-141pp. 125-126).

⁴⁶ The notion of the womb as source for hysteria had not entirely disappeared by the late nineteenth century, however. When the stigmatised cult leader Mary Ann Girling died of womb cancer in 1886, the media saw in her disease an evident explanation of her assumed insanity.

disposition. While Freud and Breuer developed a theory of hysteria, a new vocabulary came to dominate also when analysing stigmata: ‘psychosis’, ‘schizophrenia’, ‘auto-suggestion’, ‘personality disorder’, ‘mythomania’, and evidently ‘hysteria’. The hysterical mystic had by the nineteenth century long been a stereotype.⁴⁷ When discussing the ‘physical prostrations’, studies of the Ulster revival mention the spike in asylum admittances in the years 1859-1860. Across Ireland, Church authorities adopted the medical vocabulary to distance themselves from the more excited aspects of the revival; the press would invoke images of a Hogarthian ‘mob enthusiasm’ to explain the credulity of the people, thereby paving the way for class interpretations.⁴⁸ The controversial reverend William McIlwaine of Belfast, though supportive of the movement as such, strongly criticised the physical outbursts of revivalist enthusiasm—stigmata, trances, glossolalia—that accompanied it.⁴⁹ In a heavily publicised sermon bishop Knox dismissed the physical affections as ‘chiefly hysterical’.⁵⁰

Two decades earlier the Canterbury stigmatic John Thom spent three years in the Maidstone asylum, from 1832 to 1834, and was afterwards tarred with the brush of madness.⁵¹ In the 1870s Mary Ann Girling dodged the verdict of the asylum on several occasions only by explicitly challenging the authority of modern, nineteenth-century science in the courtroom. One (failed) attempt to discredit Girling in court—by portraying her first as a mesmerist, next a lunatic, finally a witch—was the result of a collaboration between the vicar, a stage mesmerist, and a physician.⁵² By then Imbert-Gourbeyre had systematically applied the vocabulary of the

⁴⁷ For an overview of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century links between lunacy and religious enthusiasm: Lionel Laborie, *Enlightening Enthusiasm. Prophecy and Religious Experience in Early Eighteenth-century England* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2015).

⁴⁸ *Coleraine Chronicle*, 1 October 1859, p. 3.

⁴⁹ Daniel Ritchie, ‘William McIlwaine and the 1859 Revival in Ulster: a Study of Anglican and Evangelical Identities’, *Journal of Ecclesiastical History*, 65.4 (2014), 803-826 (p.814).

⁵⁰ ‘The Religious Revival’, *Ballymena Observer*, 9 July 1859, p. 1.

⁵¹ Canterbury, Canterbury Cathedral Archives, P183 U3/235/3/2.

⁵² Winchester, Hampshire Record Office, 26M79/P23.

natural sciences ('maladie des cinq plaies') to his stigmatic subjects on the continent in *Les stigmatisées*.⁵³

Victorian churches found an ally in the sciences for the crusade against 'superstition', whether it manifested itself in the physical prostrations of the stigmatic women of Ulster and Belfast, Thom's antics, or Girling's millenarianism. Churches and sciences were eager to portray such mystic figures from a pathological and criminal perspective to reinforce their authoritative position in society.⁵⁴ This strategy—questioning the mystics' sanity as well as their sanctity—was not exclusively developed to deal with stigmatics, nor was it a typically British-Irish evolution. As Jan Goldstein has shown for France and Manuel Borutta for Germany and Italy, hysteria was widely diagnosed in the nineteenth century.⁵⁵ This method of sanitising and medicalising was also applied to Britain's *petites religions*—for example Spiritism, sectarianism, the anti-vivisectionist movement, vegetarianism—and 'nonconformist' figures. Victorian fasting girls, for example, were reduced to their 'anorexia mirabilis'.⁵⁶

The stigmata was one phenomenon in the long list of popular nineteenth-century pathologies of body and mind and featured prominently in compendiums like *Illustrations of the influence of the mind upon the body in health and; A pictorial atlas of skin diseases and syphilitic affections; Sanity and insanity*, between 'Spirit photography' and 'Sweating sickness'. At the turn of the century, stigmatics were 'prodded and poked by doctors';⁵⁷ their stigmata typified as 'abnormal conditions of mind', as in the often-cited *The major symptoms*

⁵³ Sandoni, pp. 34-35.

⁵⁴ Frank Miller Turner, *Between Science and Religion: the Reaction to Scientific Naturalism in Late Victorian England* (New Haven, CN: Yale University Press, 1974), pp. 72-76.

⁵⁵ Jan Goldstein, 'The Hysteria Diagnosis and the Politics of Anticlericalism in late Nineteenth-century France', *Journal of Modern History*, 54 (1982), 209-239; Manuel Borutta, 'Das Andere der Moderne. Geschlecht, Sexualität und Krankheit in antikatholischen Diskursen Deutschlands und Italien (1850-1900)', in *Kollektive Identitäten und kulturelle Innovationen*, ed. by Werner Rammert, Gunther Knaute, Klaus Buchenau and Florian Altenhöner (Leipzig: Leipziger Universitätsverlag, 2001), pp. 59-75.

⁵⁶ Like the female mystic, the figure of the fasting girl was rooted in medieval Christianity and repurposed to fit the cultural contexts of the Victorian age. Joan Jacobs Brumberg, *Fasting Girls: the History of Anorexia Nervosa* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), pp. 101-107.

⁵⁷ Heimann, 'Mysticism in Bootle', p. 351.

of hysteria, Pierre Janet's lectures at Harvard University (printed in London in 1907 and subsequently reprinted), or as part of a 'codified and stereotyped procedure' following from belief in instantaneous conversion, as in William James' more empathetic *The varieties of religious experience*.⁵⁸ By then, the term 'stigma' had become commonplace and largely detached from its religious connotations. In Max Nordau's *Entartung* (1895), hugely influential also in its English translation, the symptoms (!) of degeneration are described as 'stigmata': emotionalism, 'buying craze', philanthropy, and even mysticism itself. Simultaneously the holy wounds appeared in encyclopaedias of the supernatural, like the popular English translation of Joseph Ennemoser's *Geschichte der Magie* (1854), which situates stigmatics in the notorious company of somnambulists, fairies and vampires.⁵⁹

Both strands of literature described stigmata for the same purpose: to explain the wounds as manifestations of psychological abnormality or as products of an overactive imagination, and to prove the physical, psychological nature of the phenomenon. The body that bore the stigmata became, in a fashionably modern language, a 'site of experience'.⁶⁰ In the 1930s Herbert Thurston spoke in his correspondence with Walshe of a 'crucifixion complex' having developed among stigmatics: the stigmata were in most cases, he argued, a corporeal simulation of the pain of the Passion experience after intense meditation on the crucifixion. Ennemoser had gone further than Thurston in 1854 when he described the stigmatised body as a site of sensory experience: 'Even animals—as, for instance, horses—have been known to produce young of a certain colour which has been constantly before them.'⁶¹

⁵⁸ William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (New York: Longham, 1902), p. 203.

⁵⁹ The necessity of including the phenomenon of the modern stigmatic was explained thus: 'For of late years very remarkable phenomena have been observed in persons of the female sex, and of very pious or even fanatical dispositions; and these have been either allowed to pass unchallenged from a theological point of view, as supernatural wonders, or, on the contrary, have been ascribed to fanaticism, or intended deception.' Joseph Ennemoser, *The History of Magic*, trans. by William Howitt (London: Henry G. Bohn, 1854), pp. 99-100.

⁶⁰ For a historiographical contextualisation of the 'corporeal turn': Iris Clever and Willemijn Ruberg, 'Beyond Cultural History? The Material Turn, Praxiography, and Body History', *Humanities*, 3 (2014), 546-566.

⁶¹ Ennemoser, p. 100.

It is important to note that, though a phenomenon like the stigmata was subject to a medical turn, there was no uniform scientific ‘expert’ response to it or to supernatural occurrences in general. Some sceptics were more prone to show empathy than others. Many scientists did not keep their religious, or anticlerical, convictions separate from their psychic enquiries and let a personal Weltanschauung seep through in their diagnosis. William James, while claiming the stigmata to be a socially constructed manifestation, at the same time condemned the tendency to reduce religious experience, no matter how eccentric, to psychopathology.⁶²

3.3. *Social problem*

There was an underlying purpose to the way stigmata and stigmatics were represented, similar to how educated elites viewed and depicted other supernatural beliefs. As, for instance, magical beliefs, stigmata were situated as a premodern anomaly, believed by people ‘clinging on’ to a medieval past while a rational, enlightened present unfurled around them.⁶³ Throughout the nineteenth century, a vanguard of modernity attempted to create a clear division between a rational present and a magical, ‘superstitious’ past. By banishing to that past contemporary religious practices and beliefs that did not fit this binary logic, like stigmata, they tried to maintain this demarcation. Medical discourses proved useful to frame the mystic sufferers of stigmata themselves, but were less effective to explain their impact on society: an impact, so wrote the *Dublin Evening Packet and Correspondent* in reference to the Ulster phenomena, ‘which neither a flippant journalist nor the superficial disciple of mental science can deny’.⁶⁴ How could analysts and authorities make sense of the flocks gathered around the Ulster

⁶² James, p. 154.

⁶³ For the discourses on magic in modernity, see: Bell, particularly chapter 3.

⁶⁴ *Dublin Evening Packet and Correspondent*, 24 September 1859, p. 2.

stigmatics, the crowds cheering at John Thom in Kent, or the devotees following Mary Ann Girling to the edge of the New Forest to await the Second Coming? Just like natural and medical sciences were deployed to analyse the ‘inner life’ of the stigmatised mystic, so did Victorians construct a framework in which the popularity of religious supernatural experiences was a sign of socio-economic distress.

Charismatic leaders have been said to emerge during a ‘time of crisis, dislocation or disorientation’.⁶⁵ In extraordinary times extraordinary people of mystic authority can position themselves as a core around which a group of followers can gather, even if those figures are contested and their supernatural powers widely considered inauthentic or false. Some historians have made the connection between the individual, psychological disturbance and the social—the potential for revolution or revival—explicit, like Julia Werner for the Primitive Methodist Connexion in Nottingham.⁶⁶ A mystic’s subversive potential was described in detail in W.R. Ward’s challenge of E.P. Thompson’s magisterial *The making of the English working class*. Ward argued that rather than buttress an existing order, the mystic (Ward focused on revivalist figures, but the case can be made for any mystical phenomenon) harnessed a radical force constituting a threat to the religious establishment, and was therefore either reined in or exploited by that establishment.⁶⁷ This dialectic seemed of particular relevance when deployed on the Methodist Connexion, which allowed female preachers, had embedded itself in popular culture, and was historically more tolerant of supernatural manifestations.⁶⁸ Mary Ann Girling, for example, started her career as preacher within the Suffolk branch of the Primitive Methodists before becoming a ‘social problem’ for the establishment.⁶⁹

⁶⁵ Gary Dickson, ‘Charisma, Medieval and Modern’, *Religions*, 3.3 (2012), 763-789 (p. 766).

⁶⁶ Julia Stewart Werner, *The Primitive Methodist Connexion. Its Background and Early History* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1984), pp. 43-44.

⁶⁷ W.R. Ward, ‘The Religion of the People and the Problem of Control, 1790-1830’, *Studies in Church History*, 8 (1972), 237-257 (pp. 242-243).

⁶⁸ Hampton and Walsh, ‘E.P. Thompson and Marxism’ in *God and Mammon: Protestants, Money and the Market, 1790-1860*, ed. by Mark A. Noll (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), pp. 11-13.

⁶⁹ William Oxley, *Modern Messiahs and Wonder Workers* (London: Trubner and son, 1889), p. 78.

Stigmatics were not just perceived as threats to the *religious* status quo. In early nineteenth-century Britain, the notion of a monolithic, ‘Pittite superstructure’ that organised state and society was put forward as a means to marginalise expressions of socio-economic or revolutionary dissent.⁷⁰ That notion meant that protesters like the Anti-Corn Law Leaguers and Chartists could be pushed to the side as marginal phenomena obstructing inevitable progress. That Chartist upsurges were mostly limited to the ‘Celtic fringe’ of the British Isles—the Scottish Highlands and western Wales—and the industrial north of England seemed to illustrate the propagated marginality of such protest.⁷¹ A similar logic was applied to Victorian charismatic mystics. By constructing a socio-economic and sociological interpretation of their popularity, they too became fringe occurrences and contemporary anachronisms to be mocked, criminalised, and suppressed: part of a ‘Darkest England’, as the sociologist and religious campaigner William Booth called deprived communities in an analogy with ‘Darkest Africa’ in 1890.⁷²

Contemporaries situated the popular appeal of the Ulster stigmatics within the context of an uneducated, lower-class, and therefore impressionable populace with a predisposition toward magical or supernatural manifestations. A similar analysis was made in the notorious case of the mystical leader John Thom. In the months after his death in 1838, the government authorised a socio-economic survey of the Kentish countryside.⁷³ The ‘affair’ was interpreted by government officials and the press as an unfortunate convergence of multiple factors: the effects of the Poor Law Amendment Act (1834) on impoverished agricultural labourers, the high levels of illiteracy, the lack of schools and churches. These factors created an atmosphere

⁷⁰ S.A. Skinner, review of *A mad, bad and dangerous people? England, 1783-1846*, by Boyd Hilton, *The English Historical Review*, 122.497 (2007), 776.

⁷¹ George Rudé points out that there was one notable exception in the geography of early-Victorian protest: ‘the strange, millenarian movement of Kentish labourers at Bossenden Wood in 1838’, led by the stigmatic John Thom. George Rudé, ‘Protest and Punishment in Nineteenth-century Britain’, *Albion: a Quarterly Journal Concerned with British Studies*, 5.1 (1973), 1-23 (p. 5).

⁷² William Booth, *In Darkest England and the Way Out* (London: Funk and Wagnalls, 1890).

⁷³ Frederick Liardet, ‘State of the Peasantry in the County of Kent’, in *Central Society of Education*, 3rd edn (London: Central Society for Education, 1968), pp. 87-139.

from which malign, mad mystics could profit: socio-economic desperation and religious-educational deprivation had caused the people of Kent to flock to Thom, so concluded the surveyor. Accounts of the ‘affair’ combined the three narratives of crime, disease and social problem, portraying the subject as a mad deceiver and his followers as desperate and in distress. A lengthy account of Thom’s demise was published in the same year as his death, in which these strands were seamlessly woven together.⁷⁴ Today, the church in Hernhill outside of which Thom was buried still has leaflets on the ‘Mad Messiah’s mad, sad life’.

Seen in that light the appeal of a stigmatic was a symptom not of individual mental or medical distress, but of an ill society, of collective desperation found in ‘premodern’ pockets of Britain and Ireland. A direct cause-and-effect link was established and subsequently institutionalised through government surveys, church reports and the press. In 1937 for example, fifty years after Girling’s death, a clergyman delving into the case even explained her appeal from looking at a photo that showed Girling’s followers ‘to be the type of people who might be so influenced. For they have nice faces and are what the French term *spirituelle*.’⁷⁵ ‘Nice’ stood for gullible: to the reverend their appearance showed a naivety toward all things spiritual.

Poorly educated and impoverished agricultural workers were more prone to becoming entangled in the ‘madness’ of their mystical leader, to radicalisation and, seemingly inevitably, marginalisation. While it is important to acknowledge that mystics thrive in periods of hardship, the correlation is less straightforward than these discourses make it out to be. Both Thom and Girling, for example, counted wealthy and influential—‘modern’—figures among their followers, and both were often derided by people who should be their most ardent devotees. The distress hypothesis, ‘Economic adversity triggering religious zealotry’ as a hypothesis nonetheless survived well into the twentieth century and was adopted by social historians, for

⁷⁴ *Canterburiensis, The Life and Extraordinary Times of Sir William Courtenay* (Canterbury: James Hunt, 1838).

⁷⁵ HRO, 26M79/P23, p. 9.

whom the spiritual and theological arguments were as unsatisfying as they had been for the authors who approached the subject of popular mysticism from a psychopathological perspective. Sometimes they were lifted to implausible heights. Boyd Hilton went so far as to draw up a table in which he made a direct correlation between ‘economic interventionism with Liberal Anglicanism and pre-millenarian evangelicalism’.⁷⁶ More generally, I.M. Lewis reduced the complex relationship between religious ‘activism’ and social order to the common denominator of ‘deprivation, frustration, and discontent’.⁷⁷ Writing stigmatics back into the fabric of nineteenth-century culture presents us with a way into how the Victorians used the religious supernatural—whether as ‘superstition’, crime, disease, or social problem—to shape their period as ‘modern’ and ‘rational’.

4. Making Sense

On Good Friday 1533, the bishop of Rochester, John Fisher, held a sermon in which he compared the Holy Text to a wounded body ‘whose multiple stigmata—the scourges of letters and lines—’ were at once physical, pictorial and graphic.⁷⁸ Increasingly since the sixteenth century, however, the metaphor came to be used the other way around; the body was studied as a representation rather than in its physicality. Stigmata provided Victorians with an obvious way to ‘read’ the body, functioning as imprints to be decoded, interpreted and appropriated. Purported sufferers of the holy wounds could be represented as popular saints, criminals, mad(wo)men or threats to the socio-economic status quo. They, their wounds, and their

⁷⁶ Boyd Hilton, *A Mad, Bad and Dangerous People? England, 1783-1846* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), p. 522.

⁷⁷ I.M. Lewis, ‘A Structural Approach to Witchcraft and Spirit Possession’, in *Witchcraft Confessions and Accusations*, ed. by Mary Douglas (London: Tavistock, 1980), pp. 293-309 (p. 294).

⁷⁸ Cited in Lowell Gallagher, ‘The Place of the Stigmata in Christological Politics’, in *Religion and Culture in Renaissance England*, ed. by Claire McEahern and Debora Shuger (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), pp. 93-115 (p. 103).

followers, as this article shown, were scrutinised and situated with some success within a premodern past on the verge of extinction in a rapidly modernising age.

Nineteenth- and early twentieth-century studies historicised Victorian stigmatics, partly to normalise their ‘weirdness’ and to diminish their charismatic appeal. Thom was placed in a long tradition of charismatic, ‘mad’ rebels in Kent.⁷⁹ In a similar fashion, works on Girling have situated her within centuries of supernatural eccentricity in the New Forest.⁸⁰ The main goal of this rhetorical strategy was to place stigmata in opposition with Victorian society by stressing its superstitious, premodern nature. That this rhetoric was only ever partly effective, is shown in its persistence throughout the Victorian period: the ‘missionaries of modernism’ were forced to continually recreate the image of a superstitious past that lay only just behind, whether in the 1830s when John Thom roamed Kent or in the 1880s when Girling ruled her sect.⁸¹ For the believers themselves, however, the weight of history could serve in defence of the stigmata: some proponents of the Ulster revival considered the fact that physical prostrations had ‘accompanied all past revivals’ sufficient proof for them to be genuine.⁸² Teresa Higginson’s promoters sought to place her in a tradition of saints.⁸³

This article has offered a systematic examination of how Victorians understood stigmata in function of a modernity narrative upheld by banishing the religious supernatural to the fringes of Victorian society. From the margins, however, stigmatics interacted with that society. They were firmly rooted in Victorian culture. We cannot dismiss specific contexts within which stigmatics emerged, nor ignore historiographical tropes of, for example, mystical production and consumption patterns. Thom, for example, ‘produced’ his stigmata as one of many

⁷⁹ By comparing him to characters like William Longbeard, the rebel of Kent during the reign of Richard the First, studies like *Canterburiensis* (1838) unknowingly, and no doubt unintentionally, supported Thom’s self-made mythology.

⁸⁰ Philip Hoare, *England’s lost Eden. Adventures in a Victorian Utopia* (London: Fourth Estate, 2005).

⁸¹ Bell, p. 126.

⁸² William Reid, *Authentic Records of Revival* (London: J. Nisbet, 1860), pp. 47-48.

⁸³ Heimann, ‘Mysticism in Bootle’, pp. 352-353.

spectacular skills to awe his followers (in a similar vein he shot down the North Star with his pistol). The Ulster stigmatics could become a phenomenon only from within the cradle of revivalist enthusiasm.

Stigmatics make sense when we place them within a rich tableau of Victorian culture—comprised on the one hand of spiritualism, the occult and psychology, of séances, supernatural roadshows, millenarian cults and staged mesmeric spectacles; on the other hand of a lingering Romanticism, folk traditions, and a panoply of religious and devotional practices rooted in medieval Christianity—enthusiastically adopted, as the Ulster stigmatics illustrate, across denominational boundaries. Within that sprawling landscape, stigmatics can challenge the nineteenth-century notion of a Victorian society that dismissed visible, communal expressions of exuberant religiosity as incompatible with the idea of a monolithic modernity and instead help to reassess Victorian culture as profoundly and heterogeneously religious.