MEMORY OF THE WORLD REGISTER
The Hamilton Family fonds
(Canada)

Ref N° 2012-13

“I came away with the conclusion that Winnipeg stands very high among the places we have visited for its psychic possibilities.”
Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, Our Second American Adventure
(1924), commenting on his visit with the Hamilton family and others in Winnipeg

1 SUMMARY

The Hamilton Family fonds is the archival record of the Hamilton family’s search for proof of life after death, through their photography and documentation of séances held in their home in Winnipeg, Canada, from 1920 to 1944. Only the records deriving directly from the family’s séances are included in this application. The records are worthy of inclusion in UNESCO’s Memory of the World Register because they are of outstanding international importance as an authentic record of a timeless societal preoccupation with mortality, spirituality, and the survival of the human soul after death.

The Hamilton Family fonds is a unique body of records that provides information and insight into the spiritualist and psychical research movements of the 1920s, 30s, and 40s. This second wave of spiritualism was part of a worldwide response to an overwhelming number of deaths during the First World War and the 1918 Influenza Epidemic, and the resulting trauma among survivors. Spiritualism held out the hope that there was life after death; psychical research experiments set out to prove it. Such experiments were an expression of the modern scientific method that took advantage of new technologies such as photography in the search for truth about life after death. The two movements were an effort to balance science and religion during a tumultuous time of rapid technological advancement and erosion of the church’s authority by science.

The Hamilton Family fonds specifically documents the enquiry into life after death by Dr. Thomas Glendenning “T.G.” Hamilton, his wife Lillian, and daughter Margaret in Winnipeg, from 1920 until his death in 1935, and by Lillian and Margaret from 1935 to 1944. The investigations began shortly after the death of the Hamiltons’ son, Arthur, who died unexpectedly in 1919 during the influenza epidemic, and who was said by Margaret to have sparked the family’s interest in the possibility of an afterlife. The Hamiltons conducted their investigations through the use of mediums in séances or “home circles”. “Hamilton House” became a centre for spiritualist activities and scientific investigation.

As a man of his time, T.G. represents a curious blend of scientific and religious interests. Outside of his investigations of life after death, he was a respected medical doctor, a Fellow of the American College of Surgeons, President of the Canadian Medical Association, and locally, a member of the Manitoba legislature, chair of the Public School Board, and an elder in his church.
Although T.G. was well known for his career and public life, it was the family’s spiritualist activities that made them famous throughout Canada, the United States, Britain, and beyond. From 1926 to 1935, T.G. gave 86 lectures throughout North America and overseas, and wrote numerous widely published articles on psychical investigation. In turn the family was visited by some of the leading spiritualists and mediums of the day, including British author, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle; famous Boston medium, “Margery”, and her husband, Dr. R.L.G. Crandon; Hungarian-born British and American psychologist, Nandor Fodor; and Canadian Prime Minister William Lyon McKenzie King.

Intense interest in and broad scholarly, artistic, and popular usage of the results of the family’s experiments continues. The Hamilton Family fonds is the most widely known fonds on psychical investigation in the world. With 1.44 m of textual material and 2,681 photos, the fonds is the most extensive, complete, undisturbed record of the search for life after death extant, and, as such, is a unique, irreplaceable source for the study of this phenomenon.

A question of fraud arises in any discussion of spirit photography. To the eyes of people in the 21st century, many of the images in this fonds appear to be faked or manipulated. Whether the records are fraudulent or not, however, has not lessened their impact or their use. They are an authentic record of an investigation into life after death. And however they were achieved, perhaps it is as simple as what William Becker, director of the American Photography Museum, has stated: “These photos are compelling records of the power of belief.”

Records Selected for Nomination
The entire Hamilton Family fonds dates from 1919 to 1986, however, only the portion dating from 1920 to 1944 has been selected for nomination to the Memory of the World Register. These dates reflect the time during which séances were held, observed, and documented, with 1920 being the date when the Hamiltons as a family began to investigate life after death, and 1944 the year when Lillian and Margaret stopped conducting experiments into this phenomenon.

The majority of the material not included in this nomination relates to writing and publicity about the séances that occurred after the fact.

2 DETAILS OF THE NOMINATOR

2.1 Name
Dr. Shelley Sweeney, Head
University of Manitoba Archives & Special Collections

2.2 Relationship to the documentary heritage nominated

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1 This nomination was jointly written by Dr. Shelley Sweeney, Brian Hubner and Masters of Archival Studies intern Mary Horodyski.
The Hamilton Family fonds is held by the University of Manitoba. The fonds is housed within the University of Manitoba Archives & Special Collections (a department within the University of Manitoba Libraries). Dr. Sweeney is the Head of the University of Manitoba Archives & Special Collections.

2.3 Contact person(s)

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3 IDENTIFICATION AND DESCRIPTION OF THE DOCUMENTARY HERITAGE

3.1 Name and identification details of the items being nominated

Hamilton Family fonds  
University of Manitoba Archives & Special Collections  
330 Elizabeth Dafoe Library  
Winnipeg, MB, R3T 2N2  
Canada

3.2 Description of the documentary heritage

Provenance

T.G. Hamilton was the photographer for the sessions until his death in 1935. He had his own dark room and developed all his own prints. His wife Lillian, and later his daughter, Margaret, wrote detailed notes of occurrences at each session. Sitters who participated in the séances signed their names to the witness lists and these are well-known individuals whose identities have been traced through other sources. Margaret donated the Hamilton Family fonds to the University of Manitoba Archives & Special Collections in multiple installments between 1979 and 1986. The body of records was well known in its time, and, since its donation to the University, other corroborating archival records have been donated to the Archives by both T.G.”s and Lillian”s sides of the family.

Holdings Information

Title: Hamilton Family fonds (also known as the “Hamilton fonds” or the “T.G. Hamilton fonds”)  
Dates: 1920-1944  
Extent: 2.5 m of textual and other records  
Textual Records: 1.44 m (12 hollinger boxes)  
Photographs: 2,681
All negatives, gelatin dry plate negatives, and vintage positive prints originally made from the photographic negatives have been retained with the written records of the experiments they illustrate.

**Description and Information about the Holdings**

The fonds is primarily related to T.G., Lillian, and Margaret Hamilton’s investigations of psychic phenomena spanning the years 1920 to 1944. The subject matter of the records includes rappings, clairvoyance, trance states and trance charts, telekinesis, wax molds, belling ringing, transcripts and visions, as well as teleplasmic manifestations. The records include scrapbooks, séance attendance records and registers, affidavits, automatic writings, correspondence, speeches and lectures, news clippings, journal articles, books, photographs, glass plate negatives and positives, prints, slides, tapes, manuscripts, and promotional materials related to major publications.

**Research fund**

The T. Glendenning Hamilton Research Grant, established by the Hamilton family, offers financial support each year for scholars and researchers using either the Hamilton Family fonds or other fonds or collections within the Archives. Recipients have come from across Canada and around the world, including Hong Kong, Israel, Scotland, England, and the United States.

**Outreach**

Archives & Special Collections has hosted public presentations related to the Hamilton fonds. Social media such as Twitter, the Archives’ Facebook page, and an occasional newsletter are used to promote the fonds, communicate with the public, and advise followers and fans of news. Other outreach efforts on the Internet include a video of 35 of the most arresting images posted on YouTube, with a second copy on the Archives’ YouTube channel. The Archives has had the fonds description translated into French, German, Japanese, and Polish, and posted to the Internet. The Archives is working on having the description translated into other languages. Working with the Survival Research Institute of Canada, the Archives cleared copyright and scanned the Hamiltons’ books. These will soon be mounted on the Internet. Staff have lectured and done poster presentations on the Hamilton fonds at conferences and in a wide variety of professional and nonprofessional venues.

4 JUSTIFICATION FOR INCLUSION/ASSESSMENT AGAINST CRITERIA

4.1 Authenticity

The archives were created and accumulated by the Hamilton family during the time of the séances and were in the continuous custody of the Hamilton family (first Lillian Hamilton, then Margaret Hamilton Bach) until the time of their donation. Textual records during the period in question were often written in Lillian's and Margaret’s own hands and transcribed. The first deposit was made to the University of Manitoba in 1974 and gifted by Margaret to the University of Manitoba along with later accruals over a number of years from 1979 to 1986. In 1993-94, the fonds was appraised by the Canadian National Archival Appraisal Board for monetary value to the satisfaction of the Canadian Cultural Properties Export
Review Board.

As has been noted above, there is the issue of whether the photographs of these séances were faked, and if so, how were they faked? The photographs could have been tampered with at several points in the processing by the photographer. With this in mind, the director of the television documentary “Chasing Hamilton’s Ghost” commissioned a professional photographer in 2005 to examine the plate glass negatives. In the opinion of the photographer, the negatives themselves had not been altered.

Additionally, the photographic equipment could have been altered. The type of alteration would have varied depending on the time and technology\(^2\). However, it is generally considered that T.G. Hamilton, as the photographer, did not manipulate the outcome. There is no indication that his sincerity or integrity were ever in doubt. There was some speculation that Lillian may have been behind any fraudulent activity that took place, but it is unlikely that she would have had the technical knowledge to tamper with the cameras.

Of course, the photos could be genuine even if their content was contrived. Fraud could have been perpetrated by the medium, for example, or the medium in collusion with the photographer or others present during the séance.

Whether fraud was perpetrated by some of the mediums or participants in the Hamilton séances is an interesting question, but it has not affected the use of the fonds. Even if the photos were fakes with respect to content and recording process and therefore unreliable, they would still be authentic records as their creator had faked them, so they are authentic with respect to the creator. In other words, they would still be authentic records of T.G.’s photography. The fonds represents an authentic and historic experience of one extraordinary family, an experience that is representative of similar investigations worldwide.

4.2 World significance, uniqueness and irreplaceability

“[The Hamilton Collection is] a collection of international significance.”

[Canadian] National Archival Appraisal Board, 1980

After T.G. went public with his family’s experiments in 1926, he and the family’s investigations became famous throughout North America, Britain, and Europe. Documents exist that show that T.G. was invited to speak before a wide variety of groups at home and abroad. The Hamiltons corresponded with a large circle of people and organizations who wanted to know about their work, including Prime Minister William Lyon Mackenzie King, Sir Oliver Lodge, Dr. R.L.G. Cordon, Lady Arthur Conan Doyle, the British College of Psychic Sciences, the American Society for Psychical Research, and the Society for Psychical Research of Russian Students of [the] Philosophical Faculty (Belgrade University), among others.

Long after the death of T.G., Lillian, and Margaret, there has been a resurgence of interest in

the fruits of their experiments. This interest relates to the light the material sheds on belief systems during the second wave of spiritualism, the development of modern alternative religions, and the struggle to blend religion and science in the modern period. The fonds has made a major contribution to current studies of early popular photography, in particular spirit photos. We can also explore the fonds and its influence on scholarly books, articles and symposia on spirit communication, the effects of the 1918 Influenze Epidemic, and the use of women as mediums.

Popular works such as commercial films, television shows, books, articles on websites, blogs, and Internet biographies, reflect the interest shown by the public in this time period and activity. The electronic realm has spread the fame of the Hamilton Family fonds far and wide; one can now find information about the fonds as far away as Japan, Brazil, and France. A website entitled “SurvivalAfterDeath/CienciasPsiquicas” replicates, in Spanish, transcriptions of the Hamiltons” handwritten notes featured in English on a website in Canada. Three different versions of a YouTube video of some of the most startling images in the collection have garnered more than 220,000 hits. There are more than 300,000 hits on Google for the name “Thomas Glendenning Hamilton” alone that show him featured on a wide variety of sites in multiple languages. If one uses alternate versions of his name in connection to the paranormal, the number of hits rises to over a million. T.G. even has his own independent Facebook page! Much of the current interest is from people who believe or want to be persuaded that there is scientific proof of spirits. It is an ongoing human longing that more recently has been sparked by worry engendered by such incidents as 9/11 in the United States and world terrorism.

Perhaps the strongest influence of the fonds, however, has been as an inspiration for cultural objects: plays, novels, television shows, art exhibitions, videos, and films. While the plays, novels, and television shows have tended to be produced in North America, the exhibitions have been staged in both North America and Europe. Photos and documents from the fonds have been featured in artistic videos and commercial films created in Northern Ireland, Brazil, Canada, and the United States, and screened in New York, London, Dublin, Belfast, and at the Venice Biennale, the largest art show in the world.

Because of its contributions to scholarship and art, the loss of this important fonds would truly impoverish the global heritage. The glimpse of society and its fascination with life after death that the fonds provides will likely not be replicated, as the fonds represents a particular blend of the newness of technology (photography), and a strong need for belief in the afterlife. Today, society as a whole is only too aware of photographic manipulation through digital means. The exemplification of that moment in time, coupled with the raw emotion and sheer dedication of the Hamilton Family, captured by photography and through tens of thousands of pages of detailed notes, inform and inspire us today, and the loss of that heritage would be immeasurable.

These photographs and documents are unique, although a small number of copies of

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3 The website in Spanish is located at: [http://survivalafterdeath.blogspot.ca/2011/07/los-archivos-t-g-hamilton.html](http://survivalafterdeath.blogspot.ca/2011/07/los-archivos-t-g-hamilton.html). The website in English is at: [http://www.thehamiltonfiles.info/](http://www.thehamiltonfiles.info/).
photographs from other spirit collections are included in the fonds. The copies provide evidence of the Hamiltons’ awareness of others in contemporary spiritualist/psychical research movements.

The glass-plate negatives and Hamilton’s prints are absolutely integral to any study of spirit photography, particularly because of the interest in the possibility of fraud in the reproduction of these photos. As artistic works, again original artefacts are critical. Thus the fonds is irreplaceable.

4.3 Criteria of (a) time (b) place (c) people (d) subject and theme (e) form and style

(a) Time

The Hamilton Family fonds represents both spiritualist inquiry and the scientific investigation of psychical phenomena. It is generally held that spiritualism as a modern movement began with the Fox sisters in New York in 1848. Spiritualism rose in popularity after the American Civil War and the suppression of the Commune in Paris. After the 1870s, spiritualism was in decline, having been attacked by established churches and science. A second wave, however, occurred in the 1920s and 30s, spurred on in part by the trauma of deaths due to the First World War and the 1918 Influenza Epidemic. This is the context in which we find the Hamilton family’s experiments.

The Hamilton family tried to reconcile deep religious convictions with an interest in scientific proof of life after death. Through their explorations, they tried to answer questions such as “is there life after death?” and “is it possible to communicate with the dead?” Although such questions have occupied humans for a very long time, spiritualism and the scientific pursuit of evidence of psychical phenomena are movements that can be considered “quintessentially modern” and represent significant social and cultural change. They are modern in their challenges to both organized religion and science, in their influence on the emerging field of psychology, and in their use of new technologies such as photography.

Although early modern spiritualism was essentially Christian in character, it holds a unique place in history as a backlash against modern scientific ideas such as the Darwinian notion of the order of living beings that excluded the supernatural. Both spiritualism and psychical research embraced scientific methods to prove religious and non-religious beliefs in the afterlife. T.G. and Lillian tried to bring as much scientific rigour to their investigations of the spiritual world as was reasonable for their time, by using multiple cameras, for example, and frisking the mediums before they entered the séance room.


From the 1880s onward, scientists interested in the functions of the brain, including scientists from the new field of psychiatry, increasingly turned their attention to the phenomena produced at séances. The information received by mediums and produced “automatically” without their apparent conscious knowledge later became understood as information received from the unconscious mind. Some of the most famous pioneers in psychology and psychiatry were interested in spiritualism and its associated phenomena, including Carl Jung, Sigmund Freud, and Jean-Martin Charcot. T.G. was aware of scientific writings on this aspect of spirit communication. He tried to represent, through charts and diagrams, what was occurring in the brain, along with what he observed in the séance room.

The rise of spiritualism and psychical research is also associated with the development of new technologies such as the photographic camera. Photography was used as a method to attempt to prove the existence of psychical phenomena. T.G. set out to capture proof of spirits by ensuring from the beginning that all psychical investigations would be filmed, employing a wide variety of cameras, shutter speeds, and apertures. All aspects of the cameras were carefully documented.

The Hamilton Family fonds provides a window on this tumultuous period of the early 20th century, and is significant for its ability to demonstrate the impact of science on religious belief. Researchers can extract information about both the art and science of photography, and in particular, spirit photography, which has been the subject of much interest and debate, evident by the wealth of scholarly literature and public exhibits featuring such documents.

(c) People

The social and cultural context of the creation of this fonds reflects significant aspects of human behaviour as well as social development. The fonds exemplifies the way in which the spiritualist and psychical research movements promoted equality between women and men, reduced class divisions, and exemplified political and religious activism.

Spiritualists were often associated with emancipatory and social movements in the 19th and early 20th centuries. Most historians credit the rapid rise of this religious movement to the

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8 Sharp, Secular Spirituality, xv, also writes, “Spiritism promoted equality in theory and mingled men and women as equal participants in séances.”

9 See Bridget Bennet, “Sacred Theatres: Shakers, Spiritualists, Theatricality, and the Indian in the 1830s and 1840s,” The Drama Review 49, no.3 (2005), especially 119-120. Also John Warne Monroe, Laboratories of Faith: Mesmerism, Spiritism, and Occultism in Modern France (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2008); Ann Braude,
general public’s dissatisfaction with organized churches and the appeal spiritualism held for women. At a time, when women had little say in organized religion, spiritualism offered women a voice and equal opportunity with men. This mirrors the increased importance women assumed in political life and civil society during the 1920s and 30s, with the success of women’s suffragist movements worldwide. The integral roles played by Lillian and Margaret in fashioning and furthering the experiments exemplify these societal changes. Lillian has been credited as the driving force behind her husband, T.G. Hamilton’s investigations, and she and their daughter, Margaret, continued the investigations long after T.G.’s death.

Women changed the power dynamic, especially in their highly-regarded role as mediums. The role of the female medium operating in a private home circle significantly blurred the usual hierarchy of class and gender authority. Mediums Elizabeth Poole, and Mary and Susan Marshall were working class women who, through this opportunity, were able to play powerful roles during the Hamiltions” experiments, even though, at the time of the Hamilton investigations, Winnipeg was rigidly divided along class lines.

Beyond the mixing of classes, spiritualism and psychical research were noteworthy for their attraction for, and influence on, professionals and the elite. According to Dr. Serena Keshavjee, by “1885, mediumship and séances were well integrated into the „drawing rooms of the best society.” She added: “The credibility of the Spiritualist doctrine had been boosted... by a number of high-profile scientists and literati who publicly endorsed its tenets.” These included Victor Hugo, Johann von Goethe, and British physicist, Sir Oliver Lodge, to name only a few.

In the case of T.G. Hamilton, he was a respected medical doctor as well as politician, school board chair, and church elder. Members of his experimental group included lawyers and doctors such as Isaac Pitblado, vice-president of the Canadian Bar Association and president of the Law Society of Manitoba, and Dr. Bruce Chown, whose laboratory was instrumental in the production of Rh immune serum. Chown was later named an Officer in the Order of

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Radical Spirits: Spiritualism and Women’s Rights in Nineteenth-Century America (Boston: Beacon Press, 1989); and Lynn Sharp’s Secular Spirituality.


Canada. The Hamiltns and the rest of the siters exemplified the attraction spiritualism and psychical research had for the upper class.

Thus the Hamiltns, their siters, and their mediums mirror the rather violent social changes to class and social structure, and to gender equality that mark this particular period in history. Because of the large volume of rich contextual documentation of their activities, scholars can use these materials for studies that extend far beyond studies of spiritualism.

4.4 Issues of rarity, integrity, threat and management

Rarity
While the photos and documents in the fonds are unique, the type of fonds as a whole is rare. Spiritualist photography in general has an uneven history of preservation. Initially, many photos were valued as almost religious icons and cherished mementos, but the photographs were forgotten or even destroyed in embarrassment when beliefs shifted. Only in the last years of the 20th century did their value begin to be recognized. The Hamilton Family fonds contains the largest aggregation of spirit photographs in the world, but more importantly, the fonds provides the complete context of the photos” creation through supporting textual records, as well as through many external references in contemporary sources. The only other comparable fonds is that of Baron Albert von Schrenck-Notzing, who also tried to investigate spirits scientifically, and whose archives are at The Institute for Border Areas of Psychology and Mental Health at Freiburg University. The fonds contains spirit photos, but with virtually no supporting documentation.

Other organizations and individuals hold small collections of spirit photographs. Societies for psychical research have collections that are incomplete, lack contextual documentation, or are only copies of published photographs. Since the 1970s the value of spirit photos for the study of the history of photography and pure aesthetics has spurred their collection by such institutions as the J. Paul Getty Museum in Los Angeles, the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, and the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York. These institutions focus only on the images, however, and are content to keep them as collections in relative isolation from their context. A number of individuals hold small collections of spirit photographs. Those materials that are known to have survived have again lost most of their contextual documentation. A critical factor in all of the collections owned by these institutions and individuals is that the photos and documents have limited or no accessibility for scholars and interested members of the public.

A thorough review of the Memory of the World Register shows no other fonds or collections that document the investigation of life after death. Indeed, there are not a large number of

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materials that document the 20\textsuperscript{th} century registered as yet. One collection that could be considered a precursor to the Hamilton fonds, however, is the Emanuel Swedenborg Collection, which documents the Swedish scientist’s interest in spirits and angels after undergoing a religious crisis in 1740. The Hamilton fonds complements the Swedenborg Collection, exemplifying the attitudes towards the afterlife and the practice of spirit channelling that developed nearly two hundred years later.

\textbf{Integrity}

This fonds is very complete: except for scrapbooks of duplicate photographs given to individual family members before Lillian Hamilton died, all unique records the family held were donated to the University of Manitoba by Margaret Hamilton Bach, herself a participant in the psychical investigations. Handling of these records has been kept to a minimum and therefore the records are in very good condition.

\textbf{Threat and management}

There is no threat to the survival of this fonds. It is housed in a modern, environmentally stable building, in a vault which has additional security and climate control measures. There are environmental monitoring systems in place and specialist staff who ensure the temperature and humidity controls are kept at required standards. Additionally, the Archives’ security is monitored by a central security office on campus. The Archives’ contract conservator helps to train staff in how to handle and treat the records. A Conservation Assessment completed in 2000 includes a plan to manage the fonds. There is a disaster plan in place in the event of any physical threats.