

Reviews

The Angel and the Serpent: The Story of New Harmony.

WILLIAM E. WILSON

Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984; xiv, 242 pp.; maps, portraits, photographs, illustrations, bibliography, index; \$17.50 hardcover; \$9.95 paperback. (Reprint of 1964 edition).

This reprint of a 1964 volume outlines the philosophies of the men who founded and built New Harmony, Indiana. Henry Steele Commager noted in the *New York Times Review of Books* (October 18, 1964, p. 6) that there were two contradictory forces which led to Utopianism in America, with New Harmony home to both. First, some Utopian groups were motivated by religion as their members sought to seek salvation in a place remote from the temptations and distractions of the world. In New Harmony, this group was represented by George Rapp's Harmonists. The second force leading to the development of Utopian communities was a desire to create an ideal community as a model for the reformation of society everywhere. In New Harmony, the followers of Robert Owen represented this latter group.

Wilson discusses the beliefs of George Rapp, Robert Owen and William Maclure and the philosophers who influenced them, not always favorably. For example, he emphasizes the Harmonists' irrepressible inclination to go to court at every opportunity—a factor that gave the group a stormy history to the end of its days. Several pages are also devoted to celibacy and the speculation that George Rapp killed his son, John, while castrating him as punishment for sexual indulgence.

Wilson also emphasizes that neither the Rapps nor Robert Owen were opposed to slavery. Frederick Rapp voted to keep the subject out of the Indiana constitution. Later, Owen hoped that British abolitionists

would cease their efforts because the Jamaican slaves he had seen were so full of happy ignorance. He also urged persons of color who believed in his principles to go to Africa for such an experiment, rather than stay in New Harmony.

The discussion of Owen's New Harmony dwells on the problems of the community rather than on the glamorous aspects. Of course, these problems were undoubtedly important in that they led to the decline of Owen's experiment. Wilson concludes that it was unfortunate that Owen did not die before buying New Harmony. He had been a success until then and his life's deeds would have approximated his creed. The failure of New Harmony, however, cost Owen his beliefs, his marriage, and much of his fortune.

This book could hardly be called scholarly although Mario S. DePillis noted in his *Journal of American History* (December, 1964, p. 511) review that "the book is a convenient, well-written summary of the familiar." Wilson used few, if any, primary sources and made no attempt to relate the experiences at New Harmony to other historical questions.

Given this lack of a scholarly approach, some individuals might question why a leading university press would reprint a minor volume such as this when thousands of pages of fine original work have been written over the years. The answer is simple—sales. Wilson's book has been described as "an easy-going historical study," and as "an uncommonly interesting book" possessing "literary grace." In other words, it is well written, highly readable, and easily understood by the non-historian.

This volume remains valuable to the general reader, if not the serious scholar. Certainly anyone visiting New Harmony should read it as an introduction to the town's history.

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The Shaker Spiritual Narrative

DIANE SASSON

Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1984; xviii, 232 pp.; notes, bibliography index, engravings, photographs; \$19.95 hardcover.

A sensitive and detailed discussion of Shaker spiritual narratives, *The Shaker Spiritual Narrative* fulfills the intents of the author to "begin to explore this relatively uncharted corpus of American literature by

examining in detail the narratives of a well-defined, nonelite American religious group which produced a sizeable body of nineteenth-century personal narrative (ix) and . . . to pay "particular attention to how Believers structured their narratives" (xii).

The seven-page bibliography of primary sources is evidence that Sasson has read widely in Shaker writings. Her skill as a prose analyst, obvious through the distinctions she draws between testimony and autobiography and through her discussion of "metaphors of the Spirit" in Chapter II of the same name, is most evident in her well-wrought Chapter V, "The Form of Shaker Autobiography," where she shows the metaphorical structures that Alonzo Hollister created for the material of James Wilson's *Autobiographic Memoir*.

The two-part division of the book (Part One: The Shape of the Shaker Spiritual Narrative; Part II: Examples of Shaker Autobiography) provides for the framework and methodology established in Part I to be specified and detailed in Part II.

Although the author insists time and again that the Shakers fashioned their spiritual narratives with the images, symbols, metaphors, and language supplied for them by their Shaker culture, her sketching of the components of that culture remains only that: sketching. From this perspective, the strength of *The Shaker Spiritual Narrative* becomes its weakness. Sasson relies too heavily on the methodology of literary criticism and depends too much on the words of the spiritual narratives thereby failing to give the reader a sense of the richness of Shaker culture, theology, and spirituality. The richly textured Shaker world and the larger society surrounding the narratives need to be drawn into the analysis of the biographies.

Despite that caveat, I highly recommend this book. Its careful and thorough treatment of the documents mirrors the great respect the Shakers themselves had for people, things, and words. Sasson's quoting of significant segments of the autobiographies is itself a service to readers who do not have easy access to the primary sources. Finally, the author has made a significant contribution to the renaissance that Shaker culture is currently experiencing. Anyone with an interest in Shakers that extends beyond their furniture will appreciate this book for its analysis of a too-long ignored form of Shaker art.

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Communal Love at Oneida: A Perfectionist Vision of Authority, Property, and Social Order

RICHARD DEMARIA

New York and Toronto: Edwin Mellen Press, 1978; (Texts and Studies in Religion Vol. 2); xiii, 234pp., notes, bibliography, index; \$39.95 hardcover.

Oneida is one of America's most-studied communal societies. Its unusual longevity, its economic success, its influence in the larger communal movement of the day, the commanding presence of John Humphrey Noyes, and its renowned (or notorious) system of complex marriage have all been magnets which have drawn scholars to examine the community in some detail. DeMaria here makes a contribution to the growing body of specialized literature which deals with a specific part of community life—in this case love, and its outgrowth in marriage and social relationships.

As the title of the volume implies, DeMaria supplies a study of the theology and spirituality which underlay complex marriage, specifically working on the community's concept and practice of love. The Oneida Community, particularly in the days before the rise of its second generation, was composed of devout, if deviant, believers in Christianity, so a study of the theology of love, as opposed to the social practice of complex marriage, holds promise as an important key to an understanding of the community.

The first chapter provides historical and other introductory material about Oneida; it is competently done, but is fairly familiar stuff to scholars and others who have more than a cursory knowledge of the community. The real meat of the volume is in the next two chapters. Chapter two describes in some detail the community's (or, more specifically, Noyes's) theology of love, examining the difference between worldly and heavenly love, the basis of proper relationships between men and women, exclusivity and inclusivity in love, and the like. DeMaria demonstrates that the Oneidans saw sex as a sacrament, an expression of true Christian love. The next chapter focuses on the social system in which the love Oneidans advocated was carried out, not only describing complex marriage and the mechanisms which made it work, but showing how such distinctive principles as ascending fellowship and practices as male continence helped the community work out its unusual vision.

Chapter four examines, briefly, the ideal vs. the actuality: did it all work as well as the Oneidans said it did? The question is not finally resolved, but DeMaria seems to believe that lofty goals came closer to fulfillment, especially in the first generation, in Oneida than in many other communities. Finally he discusses the dissolution first of complex marriage and then of the community itself, suggesting that the once-fervent Christian Perfectionists eventually lost much of their zeal—and especially that the children, predictably, could not maintain the enthusiasm of their parents.

DeMaria's scholarship is impressive; he is well familiar with the body of work on the community, and his own contribution is a detailed reading of community publications, especially the *Circular*. It is on those primary documents that the study rests. This dependence is sometimes excessive, as when DeMaria tries to evaluate the success or failure of the system primarily on the testimony of the Oneidans themselves; but the exposition of what the community believed and advocated is more than sufficient to carry the tome. Though short on analysis, the book is long on description, and thus will be useful to other scholars for some time to come. Especially those who want to examine complex marriage without reading the enormous stack of the community's publications will find the book useful.

TIMOTHY MILLER

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Utopias

PETER ALEXANDER and ROGER GILL, editors

London: Gerald Duckworth and Company, 1984; xxii, 218pp.; (Colston Research Society, Colston Papers No. 35); index, plates; \$19.95 hardcover.

The objective of this volume was, keeping 1984 in mind as a social touchstone, "to explore questions concerning the present value of and need for Utopian thinking in planning and organization for the future."

Arranged in three parts, the chapters range from theoretical to transitional to practical, stopping along the way to examine the relationship of Utopias to fairy tales (Peter Alexander "Grimm's Utopia: Motives and Justification"), catalog the requirements of Utopias (C. West Churchman "The Design of a Perfect Society"), and coming full circle with Bernard Suits' "The Grasshopper: Posthumous Reflections on Utopias."

In attempting to define Utopia the approaches diverge considerably. By the third part of the book it begins to be obvious that any definitive consensus is probably unattainable.

Of particular interest to readers of this journal are two chapters by familiar names in historical American communal studies.

Donald E. Pitzer's Colston lecture, "Collectivism, Community and Commitment: America's Religious Communal Utopias from the Shakers to Jonestown," discusses the varied paths taken by selected American religious communities over the years to achieve their visions. He points out that it is entirely possible that a wider revival of alternative environments may be a way of saving the human race from the destructive path it is now taking.

This theme is enlarged upon in several other papers in the collection. The advent of the Industrial Revolution began to produce the tools which earlier Utopian designers and their interpreters required in order to achieve the envisioned results: labor-saving devices to provide the leisure time so vital to the good life; social and moral changes to provide the solutions to inequities which prevented the achievement of Utopia.

These have, however, arrived piecemeal with rather devastating results, as Mark Holloway notes in "The Necessity of Utopia." He says that the advances of technology have not been paralleled by an advance in morality. To achieve a universal Utopia is only possible through persuasion, example, education, adaptation. He departs from that, unwittingly or not, by hoping for creation of a world government "at first solely to police the world and stop aggression" and by "showing by example rather than by lip service that we will have no truck with oppressive regimes, or with cruelty and intolerance of any kind." The same time span on earth holds people who go to the moon and those in the Stone Age. How could this diverse a population police itself?

While it may have one subject, this is not a one-subject book. It is of peripheral interest to communal historians but of great interest to any society on this earth.

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Alternative Lifestyles: A Guide to Research Collections on Intentional Communities, Nudism, and Sexual Freedom

JEFFERSON P. SELTH

Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1985 (Bibliographies and Indexes in Sociology, Number 6); xii, 134pp.; notes, indexes; \$29.95 hardcover

What do intentional communities, nudist organizations, and advocates for sexual freedom have in common? Jefferson P. Selth, librarian at the University of California, Riverside, admits that adherents of these three "alternative lifestyles" are sometimes quick to dissociate themselves from each other. Many nudists, for example, dispute the popular notion that nakedness and promiscuity are synonymous. Still, Selth found that research collections on any one of these topics often house important materials on the others. His on-site inspections and interviews with curators led to a guide that is a model of its genre.

The volume is divided into three sections, with cross-references. Twelve of the profiled collections cover post-World War II secular communities. (Selth bypasses the archives of religious groups and historic communes). The second section highlights six collections on nudism, and the final section treats eighteen collections on sexual freedom. "Sexual freedom" is defined as the enjoyment of multiple sexual partners without guilt or the need to conceal one's activities from one's primary partner. Selth does not cover so-called "deviant" sexual practices (such as homosexuality or sado-masochism) except as they happen to be represented in collections of "swinging."

Among the repositories are special collections in university and public libraries, the archives of communes, information centers run by non-profit organizations, major research institutes, historical societies, private collections, and a corporate library (Playboy Enterprises). The holdings in these collections range from the usual monographs and periodicals to more elusive small press publications, personal papers, organizational files, pamphlets, newsletters, cassette tapes, videotapes, and microforms. Many of the collections feature unique (and largely untapped) files of ephemera.

Each entry provides an address, phone number, contact person, and hours of operation, plus a succinct history and general description of the collection. More detailed information on holdings and bibliographic access follows, including lists of vertical file headings, journal titles, and classification outlines. Selth notes anticipated changes to the collection and remarks on the need for preservation of materials or improved bibliographic access. Five indexes round out the volume.

Descriptions of reading and storage areas which include the dimensions of the room, the number of chairs, and the color of the carpet are perhaps superfluous. The notes on restrictions on use, interlibrary loan policies, and photocopying facilities, on the other hand, are essential. The wise researcher will still call ahead to verify the contact person's name (several listed here have moved on) and procedures for public access.

Researchers seeking collections on vegetarianism, New Age spirituality, back-to-the-land movements, single parenting, gay and lesbian couples, and a host of other "alternative lifestyles," will be disappointed, but specialists in contemporary intentional communities, nudism, and sexual freedom will delight in this definitive and inspiring guide.

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