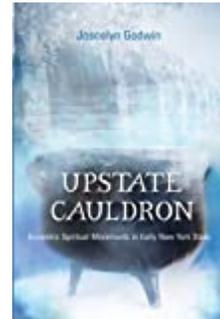


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Joscelyn Godwin. *Upstate Cauldron: Eccentric Spiritual Movements in Early New York State.* Albany: SUNY, 2015. viii + 375 pp. \$29.95 (paper), ISBN 978-1-4384-5594-5.



Reviewed by Nicole Gray (The Walt Whitman Archive, Department of English, University of Nebraska-Lincoln)

Published on H-AmRel (October, 2015)

Commissioned by Bobby L. Smiley (Vanderbilt University)

Ambitious in scope, this book takes on the history of fringe religious movements in upstate New York from the era of the American Revolution into the twentieth century. Staged as a response to the puzzling of historians over the question of why so many spiritual movements emerged in this single geographical area, *Upstate Cauldron* offers less an explicit answer than a series of vignettes and micro histories that speaks to the many forms of religious upheaval experienced by residents of and visitors to New York state in the early part of the country's history. The book is organized into twenty-five short chapters, followed by a series of maps and a gazetteer of sites. Photographs of buildings and historical sites, many taken by the author, are scattered throughout, adding texture to the descriptions and emphasizing the present-day vestiges of the spiritual turmoil and the significance of region as an organizing principle.

Godwin identifies a "central theme" as "the blend of social reform and contact with the spirit world," though social reform takes a clear second seat to the "cauldron" of spiritual phenomena that developed in upstate New York (p. 253). "Eccentric" he defines as "in the sense of being outside the Judeo-Christian mainstream," and this wide definition encompasses a variety of movements, be-

liefs, and behaviors (p. 299). The first part of the book is devoted to early (eighteenth- and nineteenth-century) spiritual movements and practices that emerged out of Christian Protestantism; the second half mostly involves figures affiliated with the development of modern spiritualism, a nineteenth-century phenomenon whose advocates believed in the existence of a spirit world with which communication was possible. In his first two chapters, Godwin sets the stage for the radical developments that follow by positioning the emergence of spiritual communities within social, historical, and geographical factors, from the colonization and settlement of the area to its industrialization, and from the Protestant sects that occupied early New York to the more eccentric spiritual movements that formed in what, after the Second Great Awakening, was called the "Burned-over District" (p. 20).

In chapter 3 we are introduced to our first two avatars of eccentric spiritual movements, Mother Ann Lee of the Shakers and Jemima Wilkinson, the "Publick Universal Friend" (p. 31). Lee and her followers believed in the Second Coming of Christ, taken to be Lee herself, after her death. Wilkinson, in turn, claimed to be overtaken by spirit after an early encounter with ty-

plus fever, and established a small community of separatist Quakers who eventually settled in upstate New York. Godwin then moves into the nineteenth century, describing visions and revelations that emerged mostly as offshoots of Christianity, some of which led to major religions—Seneca prophet Handsome Lake and the Gaiwi’io (“the Good Word”), a syncretic religious movement that grew out of the cultural encounter between Christians and American Indians; William Miller, the Adventists, and other groups with strong millennial beliefs; utopian communal experiments, from Buffalo Creek to Oneida; Joseph Smith and the development of Mormonism. Chapters are loosely structured around constellations of movements, people, and phenomena; one chapter, for instance, leaps from Parley Pratt’s involvement with Mormonism and his 1830 vision, in which light took the form of a compass (a shared symbol of Mormons and Freemasons), to Mordecai Noah, Freemasonry, and the attempted formation of Ararat, a refuge for Jews, near Buffalo in 1825.

The second part of the book traces modern spiritualism to a range of movements that emerged out of and in relation to it, beginning with Andrew Jackson Davis, the “Poughkeepsie Seer,” a major voice of spiritualism in the nineteenth century. Another is the Fox sisters, whose reports of spirit rapping in Hydesville in 1848 opened the door to an assortment of spirit communications over the next several decades, despite many skeptics and occasional recantations by the sisters and others associated with the movement (Godwin dismisses the “superficial” historical tendency to seize on the recantations as proof that the movement was entirely fraudulent, noting that the Hydesville phenomena began before the Fox sisters’ reports) (p. 135). Fascinating figures populate the chapters that follow, including Paschal Beverly Randolph, who Godwin calls “one of the unsung heroes of Black American history” (p. 159), and Thomas Lake Harris, whose critical neglect Godwin wryly attributes to “soporific poetry and impenetrable prose” (p. 184). Randolph was over the course of his life an orator, “clairvoyant physician,” hashish importer, and automatic writing medium from New York who traveled the world and published several volumes and pamphlets about his interactions with spirits, sexual science, and human origins. Harris, a Universalist minister influenced by Davis, went on to create a short-lived community in Mountain Cove, Virginia, of which he was one of two leaders and “Lord’s chosen vessels” (p. 186); to improvise spirit-inspired verse, which he published in several volumes; and to establish vineyards in upstate New York, tended

by his followers, who were called the Brotherhood of the New Life. These examples show some of the variety and the parallels that emerge across Godwin’s chapters, as figures move into and away from spiritualism, create communities of like-minded followers, publish printed books and pamphlets, and travel the world.

The overlap between spiritual movements and socially and politically progressive rights advocates in the nineteenth century prompts Godwin to include brief discussions of prominent women’s rights and abolitionist activists (Matilda Gage, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Frederick Douglass, and William L. Garrison, among others), as well as freethinkers like Robert Ingersoll, despite occasional efforts by such figures to renounce or distance themselves from the seances and spiritualism of some of their colleagues. There are chapters on Madame Blavatsky and Theosophy, Cyrus Teed’s hollow earth and Koreshanity, and even literary connections like L. Frank Baum, whose *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* (1900) hints of Baum’s interest in Theosophy. Godwin concludes with a brief foray into the twentieth century with Elbert Hubbard and Gustav Stickley, “emphasizing the spiritual side” of these two figures and its contribution to the development of the Arts and Crafts movement, though neither Hubbard nor Stickley was expressly affiliated with any religion (p. 276). His final chapters cover New York architect and Theosophist Claude Bragdon and a series of modern-day movements and still-extant upstate communities with New Age, Eastern, and occult practices and beliefs.

One of *Upstate Cauldron*’s greatest virtues could also be called its greatest weakness. The exciting and occasionally dizzying array of people, movements, communities, and beliefs produces an opportunity to make connections across movements and among people, providing a rich sense of the web of influence, counter-influence, revelation, and resistance over a tumultuous two centuries in upstate New York. But the speed with which the book dashes from one extraordinary story to the next may leave the reader wishing for more in-depth treatment, and occasionally produces gaps or disorienting lapses in information. This is not the book to read in search of deep analysis or a history of critical conversations about any single spiritual movement or phenomenon. Godwin raises major players, but important historians and critics of spiritual movements are absent from both text and bibliography. Excellent studies dealing with figures discussed in *Upstate Cauldron* have been published in the last decade, and John Lardas Modern

or Molly McGarry, for instance, would have been useful points of reference for the chapters relating to spiritualists, in particular. Still, on the whole, this is a very readable, enjoyable book, and its engaging and wide-ranging coverage of the spiritual territory of upstate New York would make it a good starting point for anyone beginning research into nineteenth- or early twentieth-century spiritual phenomena.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-amrel>

Citation: Nicole Gray. Review of Godwin, Joscelyn, *Upstate Cauldron: Eccentric Spiritual Movements in Early New York State*. H-AmRel, H-Net Reviews. October, 2015.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=44010>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.