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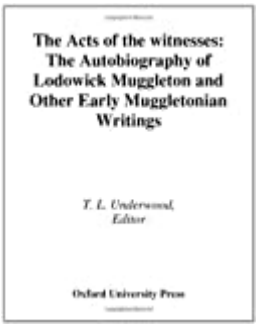

Ted L. Underwood, ed. *The Acts of the Witnesses: The Autobiography of Lodowick Muggleton and Other Early Muggletonian Writings.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999. xi + 260 pp. $49.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-19-512074-5.

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Select Cuts from the Lunatic Fringe or the Mental World of an Heretical Seventeenth Century London Tailor?

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The Muggletonians are, in historical terms, the coelacanths of the radical religious sects of seventeenth-century England. Long thought extinct, they resurfaced in the twentieth century, the emergence of their archive in the 1970s happily coinciding with a re-awakening of academic interest in these sectarian groups. The Muggletonians had long been known about but were often dismissed as insignificant crackpots, not worthy of serious academic attention. Certainly, their beliefs singled them out from the panoply of religious sects and movements of the 1640s and 1650s. There was quite simply, no one else like them. In 1652, John Reeve, a London tailor, heard the voice of God tell him that he and his cousin Lodowick Muggleton (also a tailor) were the two last witnesses of the book of Revelation 11:3. Reeve was to be God's messenger and Muggleton Reeve's mouthpiece–as Aaron was to Moses. The two witnesses were endowed with the power of final spiritual arbiters on earth, able to bless some to eternal happiness and curse others to everlasting damnation. Aside from this belief in their own authority (strengthened when the movement fell under Muggleton's control by the insistence that God took no immediate notice of his saints' activities), Reeve and Muggleton also asserted that God existed in bodily form like that of a man between five and six feet tall and reigned in heaven some six miles above the earth. (Their insistence that God resided in one person meant that they had to explain that Moses and Elijiah had deputized for the Almighty in heaven whilst he was down on earth in the form of Jesus Christ.) They also held that the stars and moon were much the same size as they appeared from the ground, and that angels were male spiritual beings of pure reason. Reeve died in 1658 but Muggleton lived until 1698, enduring power struggles–first with the one time "Captain of the Rant," Laurence Clarkson, and then with Walter Bohanan and William Medgate over the doctrine of "immediate notice,"–and surviving to bequeath his name to the group.

It was assumed that the Muggletonianism had pe-

tered out as a movement in nineteenth century, until the Unitarian minister and religious historian Alexander Gordon was invited to a Muggletonian meeting in the 1860s. However, by the early twentieth century, this brief moment of outside interest had waned, and Lytton Strachey feared that the sect had died out. It was only an exchange of letters in the *Times Literary Supplement* concerning the possible influence of the group on William Blake which led to E.P. Thompson making contact with one Mr. Philip Noakes of Matfield Kent. Noakes, "the last Muggletonian," died in 1979 but he managed to preserve the sects' archive for posterity (the manuscripts were later bought by the British Library) and it is from this still largely unmined treasure-trove that Underwood has taken this collection of pamphlets, books, and letters.

Professor Underwood is well qualified to edit selections from this archive, having previously edited portions of Bunyan's works and having written widely on Quakers and Baptists in seventeenth-century England. I have very few quibbles with the way he has carried out his task here. He offers a good, clear introduction to the sect which suffers only by his readiness to accept Jerome Friedman's dubious categorization of Thomas Tany and John Robins as Ranters. Underwood makes some very worthwhile qualifications to Hill's argument that the movement was essentially under Reeve's leadership until 1658, though he concedes that Reeve almost certainly wrote most of the early works with little contribution from Muggleton. The collection itself contains not only Muggleton's autobiography, *The Acts of the Witnesses of the Spirit* (1699) but also two works which outline the Muggletonian belief system, Reeve and Muggleton's *A Transcendent Spiritual Treatise* (1652) and John Saddington's *The Articles of True Faith* (1675), along with Thomas Tomkinson's polemical work *The White Devill Uncased* (1704). Underwood also reproduces a number of Muggleton's letters, which detail his quarrels with William Penn and Laurence Clarkson. These letters also dispel the image of Muggleton as merely a petty demagogue, as Underwood includes his surprisingly liberal responses to his followers' moral dilemmas. In one letter, he tells a Mrs. Hampson of Cambridge that the death of her child was not the product of witchcraft, for infants "are not capable of feare: for fear and beliefe is the Inlet to all Witchcraft" (p. 210). In another he tells a follower who had contracted the pox from sleeping with a prostitute after a heavy drinking session "I shall neither Justifie nor condemn you, Neither will God himselfe condemne you for it" (p. 200). An important appendix reproduces the portions excised from the 1661 edition of *A Divine Looking Glass* with their effusive praise of the Lord Protector, "Most Heroic Cromwell" (p. 234). I have only one minor criticism of the way in which the book is laid out. Would it not have been better to have the frontispieces to these works included with texts, rather than have them placed, disembodied, in the introduction?

This collection is then, well edited and, and by and large, well presented. The question remains though, why should anyone be interested in this stuff? There has long been a tradition of simply dismissing Muggleton and his followers as brain-sick gutter trash. Even the great Marxist historian, Christopher Hill–himself no mean champion of plebeian radicalism and religious heterodoxy–admitted that he had long considered that the Muggletonians were beyond the pale of serious academic study. Needless to say, Hill changed his mind, and in one of his contributions to the collaborative monograph *The World of the Muggletonians* (London, 1983), tried to answer the question "Why bother with the Muggletonians?" He provided two justifications for studying them. The first was that, like Everest, the Muggletonian archive was there and someone had to tackle it. Secondly, and more importantly, the Muggletonians offered an insight into the mental world of radical artisans and tradesmen in seventeenth-century England. Very few historians, however, have examined the Muggletonians in isolation. They have been treated by Hill and E.P. Thompson as, respectively, contexts for the thought of John Milton and, less implausibly, William Blake. The book edited by Barry Reay, William Lamont, and Hill treated them very much as part of the multitude of religious sects that emerged in England in the 1640s and 1650s. And, in an endorsement, Richard L. Greaves tells us that this edition of Muggleton's autobiography will be of great use to "those interested in Friends, Baptists, Independents, 'Ranters,' and assorted radicals." Perhaps Greaves took it as a given, but his comments are notable for the way in which he fails to mention the study of Muggletonianism itself.

Underwood hopes that this critical edition will act as a spur to further research on the Muggletonians. In some ways, the remarkable story of their re-discovery has overshadowed considered discussion of the group. They have also suffered somewhat by being lumped in with the other religious sects of the 1640s and 1650s. The accounts of alehouse disputes over the authority of the witnesses, the encounters with Tany and Robins, certainly give us a vivid picture of the "radical milieu" so well documented by Hill, A.L. Morton, and others. However, current research on the Muggletonians has really only scratched

the surface. It has also, so far, been somewhat misdirected. To be sure, there are elements of Muggletonian thought which resemble those espoused by other radical groups: the notion of the devil as internal, not external; the inheritance of ideas from European mysticism, from Jacob Boehme and Joachim of Fiore; the attack on formal worship and a professional clergy. There had also been men who had claimed to be the two last witnesses before Reeve and Muggleton published their revelations. However, there are so many other elements which seem to belong to the Muggletonians alone that is seems to me a diminution of their rightful significance to consider them simply as one small part of the "radical underground" in mid-seventeenth century England. This is not merely a call for a "vertical" approach to the history of the Muggletonians, as advocated by Lamont, though doubtless this would be valuable in telling us how a belief system can be sustained, almost unchanged, over centuries.[1] I think that a good steer to the direction research could take was offered by Barry Reay in his concluding chapter to *The World of the Muggletonians* when he compared Muggleton to the subject of Carlo Ginzburg's *The Cheese and the Worms* (Baltimore, 1980), the sixteenth-century Italian heretical miller, Domenico Scandella. Surely a similar approach to Ginzburg's, focusing as much on the influence of popular practices of cursing and astrological prediction, as on the "radical milieu" of Quakers, Ranters and Baptists, might help reveal the true richness of Muggleton's mental world. It is to be hoped that Underwood's excellent collection of documents will act as a catalyst to just this kind of research.

Note

[1]. William M. Lamont, "The Muggletonians, 1652-1679: A 'Vertical' Approach," *Past & Present* 99 (1983): 41-65.