

W. John McINTYRE, *Children of Peace*, (Montreal and Kingston, McGill-Queen's University Press, 1994, pp. xvi + 260, ISBN 0-7735-1195-4)

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The volume includes thorough notes and references, a detailed list of the examples on the CD, a useful glossary, an index and a refreshingly sensible system for Cyrillic transliteration.

It has taken a long time for Rice to produce a full-length book—and this one was worth the wait.

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I

"What are we to make of a group of people who called themselves Children of Peace," asks W. John McIntyre, "[people who] were inspired by visions of men, women, and children in varying states of nakedness; and believed that they were called by God to build a temple and a community that would usher in the Christian millennium?" (xi). Answering this and many other questions about a millennialist sect which flourished in Ontario from 1812 to 1890 is the author's purpose in this new publication, based on his University of Delaware doctoral thesis. It covers an amazing range of historical, social, architectural, ritual, artifactual, religious, political and contextual aspects of the Children of Peace. Ten densely-packed chapters which include figures, tables, and songs and poems are followed by a massive bibliography.

Throughout his study McIntyre adheres to his intention to treat “religious conviction and secular concerns on an equal footing” and accord written documents equal status with artifacts (xi-xvi). At the same time, he tries, perhaps less successfully, to deal with the sect’s “mystical, spiritual side.” He adopts James Deetz’s definition of material culture as “that sector of our physical environment that we modify through culturally determined behavior” (xiv). But he examines material culture only “in partnership with” other approaches to fully investigate the group’s social history, ideas and community structure. He makes specific use of work by Dolores Hayden (buildings and uses of space); Richard Bauman (Quaker speech patterns, the “rhetoric of impoliteness”, the “co-participation” of preachers and listeners); Henry Glassie (material culture “as evidence of complex structures of beliefs and ideas”); William Westfall (a “religion of experience” versus a “religion of order”); and Robert Plant Armstrong (the “affecting presence” of buildings).

## II

The Children of Peace, disowned by the Yonge Street Quaker Meeting in 1812, settled in East Gwillimbury township at the village of Hope (now Sharon), 50 km north of Toronto. At their peak in 1851, they numbered nearly three hundred members. Their leader was the charismatic David Willson (1778-1866), who arrived in Upper Canada from New York State in 1801. Doctrinal disputes with orthodox Quakers, plus an implacable sense of his own “ministry,” propelled Willson and his followers out of the Yonge Street Meeting.

By 1832 the Children of Peace had built their own meeting house and, thanks to the highly-skilled Ebenezer Doan, the impressive three-storey, “trinitarian” Temple of Peace, which still stands. Involvement in Upper Canada’s political struggles in the 1830s was followed by some consolidation in the quieter 1840s. However, “the millennium did not come to East Gwillimbury” (186), and by 1851, the heavily intermarried sect “could no longer see itself as set apart from the world” and faced competition from the Methodists, Anglicans, Sons of Temperance and Masons (181-2). Further decline (while being pushed towards the Protestant mainstream) saw membership dwindle to thirty-four by 1871, and the last religious service was held in 1889. The Temple, purchased by the York Pioneer and Historical Society in 1918, today sees various public uses, including CBC concert broadcasts, while renovations continue.

## III

Central to understanding this community’s worldview are Willson’s apocalyptic visions, two of which are represented on colourful banners that were used in processions and now hang in the Temple. These items, McIntyre says, are not just “folk art” (Why would this categorization be a problem?) and should be considered as “corporate symbols of belief and identity” (30-31). One banner, poorly reproduced on the book’s dust jacket, depicts a red-robed, bare-breasted woman carrying two white-robed children and holding a flag emblazoned with “PEACE”

and a stylized sun surrounding an open eye. Willson took this vision to mean he was to set her upon the sea, a symbol of "ancient wisdom," for safety. The other banner shows two children—Moses and Christ—with a book and scrolls, a dove, lambs, a stream and mountains, the whole image speaking of divine wisdom being available to all (31-34).

Noteworthy along with these banners and a very unQuakerlike desire for pageantry were the sect's love feasts, egalitarian form of worship, band and choral music, concern for community welfare, and emphasis on education. Ritual events included a monthly almsgiving service and an annual "Illumination" service. McIntyre discusses all of these in detail, and offers instructive parallels with Shakers and other groups.

Building design is necessarily a major topic. For Quakers, a meeting house was a "three-dimensional embodiment of...unspoken beliefs and assumptions" and is thus a text to be read (15). Architectural layouts imply "certain patterns of behavior and decorum" (14); here, for example, the intimacy afforded by people seated facing each other. The Temple, designed by Willson with Jewish and Christian models in mind, was constructed over a Biblically-inspired seven years. The unique seventy-five-foot-high structure's foursquare layout conveyed the idea that "the Inner Light was available equally to all people" (52). Used only fifteen times a year, the symmetrical, many-windowed Temple features doric columns named for the twelve apostles. At the centre is a splendidly-carved "altar," a sort of ark of the covenant, surrounded by columns labelled Faith, Hope, Charity and Love.

McIntyre demonstrates that the Doan residence, now also located on the Sharon site, exemplifies the "diffusion of vernacular architectural forms across North America" (142). He meticulously examines such items as the finely-carved ornamental boxes made by a member jailed during the 1837 Rebellion; the Temple's barrel organ, which played pre-set tunes for the congregation's instruction and accompaniment; an 1837-39 account book, which reveals commerce was tempered by commitment to the whole community's well-being; and John Doan's will, exhumed for its clothing inventory in view of "the metaphorical and symbolic overtones of plainness and elaboration" and the importance of both "dress and address" in Quaker "conversation" (126-28).

All through the book, and especially in the final chapter, McIntyre provides an ever-widening sense of the historical, intellectual, and social context of the Children of Peace including, for instance, their relation to contemporary political developments, Quaker theological disputes, other millennial groups of the period, and communitarian experiments by Owenites and Fourierists.

#### IV

McIntyre's book is comprehensive, informative, quite readable—and thoroughly researched almost to a fault. There are some minor irritations, such as the uninspired ordering of its chapters, and the appearance in the text of items, such

as a membership list, that could go into an Appendix. As well, books dealing with material culture surely need top-quality photographs and illustrations, but here, illustrations of the Doan residence and the ornamental boxes do not reward close scrutiny. The “nailhead trim” and “beaded pine boards” in the Doan house could use an annotated illustration. Indeed, for all the buildings discussed, floorplans, elevations, and additional (but sharper) photographs would help. Some artifacts discussed receive no illustration—the barrel organ, for instance, which visitors to Sharon may find both visually and aurally impressive.

Readers may want more insight into other matters too: for example, the actual musical tunes used—the principles of selection, the harmonies, if any, and so on; the nature of the “affecting presence” of meeting places when the congregation was singing and the band was playing; the sense of spirituality afforded or enhanced by the community’s collective rituals.

The author generously concludes that the vanishing of the sect’s way of life “need not be seen as failure” (208). But surely we can ask why the Children of Peace didn’t enjoy the success—that is, the long-term survival—of, say, the Mennonites or of some other Quaker groups. Additionally, McIntyre claims Willson’s followers may have possessed “premature truths,” namely “the *collective will and vision*” (italics in original) that are needed today “to solve the problems that face our cities and countryside” (209). However, if as John F. C. Harrison suggests in “Robert Owen’s Quest for the New Moral World in America” (in *Robert Owen’s American Legacy*, Donald E. Pitzer, ed., Indianapolis, Indiana Historical Society, 1972), the ultimate test of someone seeking a “new moral world” is that “his ideas become part of the accepted body of social thought, and the things he works for are no longer thought to be strange,” then what enduring, really practicable legacy have the Children of Peace left us?

Such questions aside, “to dismiss [the Children of Peace] merely as cranks or eccentrics” would be, as McIntyre justifiably says, “to miss a fascinating story from the rich diversity of early Canadian life” (xi). Though the author might have given his historical imagination freer reign, thereby bringing the Children of Peace even more fully to life, he has told their story effectively, and his well-crafted narrative should find a receptive audience.

*Note:* An excellent study, complementing McIntyre’s by discussing market and moral economies, “rural millennialism” and other issues, is Albert Schrauwers, *Awaiting the Millennium: The Children of Peace and the Village of Hope 1812-1889* (Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 1993).

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