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## BOOK REVIEWS

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*The Ephrata Commune: An Early American Counterculture.* By E. G. Alderfer.

(Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1985. Pp. xiii, 233.  
Preface, appendix, notes, bibliography, index, illustrations.  
\$21.95 cloth; \$8.95 paper.)

In 1786, the remaining members of the once flourishing Ephrata commune published a history of their enterprise and its founder, Conrad Beissel, entitled *Chronicon Ephratense*. The commune, which under Beissel's guidance had attracted over two hundred communicants, created an extensive body of music, and served as one of the colonies' earliest and best publishers, had grown old and weak. Because few other sources of information on Beissel and the Ephrata commune existed, the *Chronicon* dominated in style, emphasis, and focus all later works concerning both Beissel and the commune. Save for its efforts to place the commune's existence in a larger communal history framework, E. G. Alderfer's recent work, *The Ephrata Commune: An Early American Counterculture*, continues the *Chronicon's* legacy.

Alderfer's work benefits from the chronicle *genre* in two important ways. First, the chronicle format allows the author to tell a story as most of us are used to hearing and reading stories. That is, it proceeds through time from one point to another — in this case from Conrad Beissel's birth, through his formation of the Ephrata commune, to the commune's death. The story often seizes our attention as Alderfer relates various information about Beissel and the commune.

*The Ephrata Commune* is, in parts, an important and entertaining story. Alderfer tells us of Conrad Beissel's early life in Germany, his adoption of a mystical pietism, and of his journey to America in search of both an escape from persecution and a place to begin the spiritual regeneration of humankind. The author recounts Beissel's successes and failures with the Ephrata commune. We learn that the commune was most successful, in terms of attracting members, practicing piety, and, at times, making money, from the 1730s through the 1760s. The author notes Ephrata's extensive contacts with other German religious groups in the American colonies, the commune's extraordinary musical and literary accomplishments, and its intermittent persecution by civil

governments and neighbors in Pennsylvania. Finally, Alderfer relates to us the events surrounding Beissel's 1768 death and the demise, shortly thereafter, of the commune itself. Because Beissel's charisma was Ephrata's chief attraction, Beissel's successors in spiritual leadership at Ephrata found it difficult to convert new members.

The second and most important advantage the author derives from adopting the *Chronicon Ephratense* mode is his ability to transport the reader into the Ephrata frame of mind. By telling the Ephrata story in a manner much like that of the *Chronicon's* author (or authors, there is some confusion on this point), Alderfer reveals his own respect for the commune's way of viewing themselves, and adopts many of the values and judgments inherent in their version of their history. Alderfer's villains are those people whom the commune expelled, and the virtues Alderfer identifies coincide with the ideals Beissel set out to uphold throughout his lifetime. This proves an effective, though perhaps unintentional, way of conveying to the reader more about the commune's constitution and outlook.

If the narrative approach chosen leads to an often valuable and fascinating chronological story, it also encourages the inclusion of a plethora of details which render the story sometimes tedious. We are frequently told the names of all the known participants of various rituals in which Beissel figured, even if they were significant only because they were present when Beissel, too, was there. Alderfer relates many of Beissel's activities — especially from his early years — without making evident why they are relevant to the larger story.

Chronicles do not encourage analytic rigor, and consequently *The Ephrata Commune* does not address some of the most interesting questions a more critical reader of the *Chronicon* might raise. For example, Beissel and his teachings attracted many women — often married women — away from their homes to live a celibate life in the Ephrata cloister. Save for a single sentence acknowledging that women may have sought relief from the "sexual slavery" of their relationships (p. 47), Alderfer refrains from addressing the possible reasons for this extraordinary life-course change. Also, although Ephrata depended to an inordinate degree upon Beissel's charisma and teachings, Alderfer avoids analyzing Beissel's "inner spirit and psychic engine" because he believes it would be "presumptuous" to do so (p. 68).

Still, Alderfer adds perspective to the Ephrata experience by discussing briefly in the first chapter earlier counterculture and utopian groups which may have inspired the Ephrata commune and assessing in the last chapter the fates of commune experiments in the decades

following the demise of Ephrata. He also adds tables in an appendix which highlight some important aspects of various communes throughout history.

Though Alderfer is not the first to tell Beissel's and the commune's story, he rightly points out that his is the most extensively footnoted and accessible version. The author expressed his hope that the work will interest the general reader and scholars interested in the Ephrata phenomenon, the Pennsylvania German milieu, and the communal tradition. *The Ephrata Commune*, like the *Chronicon* itself, surely merits the interest of a broader range of scholars than those the author identifies (especially scholars of American religious and colonial history), but it would probably fail to hold a general reader's attention. ■

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*The Anthracite Aristocracy: Leadership and Social Change in the Hard Coal Regions of Northeastern Pennsylvania, 1800-1930.* By Edward J. Davies II.

(DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 1985. Pp. xvi, 277. Acknowledgments, tables, illustrations, maps, index. \$27.00.)

Just when many social historians were beginning to believe that their history "from the bottom up" was destined to carry the day, along comes another book about economic and social elites. This one describes the evolution of an upper-class entrepreneurial elite in northeastern Pennsylvania's coal-rich Wyoming Valley. It ought to be on the shelves of all social historians, irrespective of their views as to the direction from which they might better study the social ladder.

Davies' work is part of a growing body of literature in which historians and social scientists are seeking to understand the structure and functioning of American society, and particularly part of those studies which have described the development of a business aristocracy whose decisions often determined the ultimate fate of cities and towns across the nation. By blending the models provided by scholars who have produced earlier works, Davies has not only produced a study of small city leadership but has gone beyond this urban focus to develop a regional study. Even beyond this, he has included in his