H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Catherine M. Rokicky. *Creating A Perfect World: Religious and Secular Utopias in Nineteenth-Century Ohio.* Athens: Ohio University Press, 2002. Ix + 181pp. $34.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8214-1439-2.

Reviewed by Donald E. Pitzer (University of Southern Indiana)
Published on H-Communal-Societies (December, 2002)

Ohio's Nineteenth-Century Communal Utopias

Ohio's Nineteenth-Century Communal Utopias

Catherine Rokicky's *Creating A Perfect World* is the fourth volume published in the Ohio Bicentennial Series, commemorating the 1803 statehood of Ohio, and designed to "provid[e] students, scholars, and the interested public with a new, fuller picture of the development of Ohio life" (dust jacket). Focusing on the Shakers, Zoarites, Mormons, Owenites and Fourierists, this book presents an overview of many, but not nearly all, of the utopian communities established by religious and secular movements, and individuals, in nineteenth-century Ohio.

Classroom students and general readers will find a handy map of the communal sites (p. 6), concise descriptions of the concepts and conditions that motivated these movements and their leaders, and fascinating details of the novel practices and workings that took place. Scholars, however, will notice the omission of more than a dozen important Ohio communal utopias of this era. They will see the nearly exclusive use of the long-wave economic crises interpretation to explain why and when utopian communities came into being. They will lament that, despite the use of a few primary communal documents, archival collections, and recent scholarly works, the text too frequently relies on dated communal and general secondary sources, such as Emilius O. Randall's 1904 *History of the Zoar Society* and Alice Felt Tyler's 1944 *Freedoms Ferment.* Scholars will detect the use of badly chosen sources for certain topics, such as Randall's history of Zoar to describe the Harmony Society of George Rapp (rather than the works of an authority like Karl J. R. Arndt, and others). Together with occasional carelessness, these problems lead to an accumulation of inexcusable factual errors. Some of these shortcomings are illustrated below.

The first of the four chapters depicts the Shaker communities at Union Village (1805-1912), Watervliet (1806-1910), North Union (1822-1889), and Whitewater (1823-1907). Chapter Two tells the story of the Society of Separatists of Zoar (1817-1898). Chapter Three explains the first Mormon effort at communal living in Kirtland, near Cleveland, between 1830 to 1838. Rokicky devotes only the final chapter to the far more numerous but generally shorter-lived secular communities established by socialistic and radical reform movements and eccentric individuals. She describes the Owenite communities of Yellow Springs (1825-1826), Kendal (1826-1829), Equity (1833-1835), and Fruit Hills (1845-1852) inspired by Robert Owen of New Lanark, Scotland. And she outlines the Fourierist phalanxes advocated by Charles Fourier of Paris, France: the Marlborough Association (1841-1845), Ohio Phalanx (1844-1845), Clermont Phalanx (1844-1846), Trumball Phalanx (1844-1848), Columbia Phalanx (1845), Integral Phalanx (1845-1846), Utopia (1847-1858), and Memnonia Institute (1856-1857) in Yellow Springs led by the eclectic Dr. Thomas L. and Mrs. Mary S. Gove Nichols. The Spirit Fruit Society in Lisbon, founded by Jacob Beilhart and once visited by future president Warren G. Harding, is also given attention.

Creating a Perfect World joins a limited number of state histories of communal utopias. For reasons suggested above (and because it breaks little new ground, draws from few recent sources, and suggests no new interpretation), this book does not rise to the level of *California's Utopian Colonies*, the first communal study by Robert V. Hine, in 1953. Nevertheless, Rokicky's work has qualities to recommend. Archival photographs enliven the text with images of Shaker and Zoarite architecture, and illustrate the adults and children of these communities at work, school, and leisure. Also shown are the Zoar band and organ, and Mormon leaders Joseph Smith and Sidney Rigdon. No such graphics are offered to illustrate the non-sectarian communities or their leaders. The author does take care to describe the status and role of women in the Ohio communities, which was of-

ten superior to that of women in the outside society of the times. In all, the narrative puts the movements and communities into state and national historical context and explains their rise, beliefs, goals, organizational structures, economies, practices, difficulties, and demises.

Rokicky shows how Ohio's isolated frontier, cheap land, easy access via waterways, cultural diversity, relatively tolerant atmosphere for experimentation, and friendly reception of the religious fervor of the Second Great Awakening can help to explain its attraction of religious innovators, millennialists, dissenters, and radical reformers from New England, New York's Burned-Over District, and Europe. She does not shrink from the exuberant, eccentric, and controversial founders, leaders, beliefs and practices of the Ohio communities, or the realities of outside opposition. She gives the sense of the power of utopian, millennial, and communal ideas to move native Ohioans to forsake their individualism and private capitalism–if only briefly in many cases–to embark on the difficult founding of communistic and socialistic communities under charismatic leadership, in search of a better life.

However, Rokicky does not fully assess the larger significance of the Ohio communes as social experiments, testing and defining the limits of freedom in a moderately tolerant American society that was becoming increasingly more urbanized, industrialized, and ethnically diverse. The presence of these movements have lessons to teach Americans in the post-September 11, 2001 period, that could have come through more clearly in these pages.

Finally, the book's omissions, errors, and misleading impression that the attractiveness of communal reform and intentionally shared living faded after 1900, must be addressed. This work has lost an excellent opportunity to give readers an exhaustive listing of all the known Ohio communes of the nineteenth century. Even if it excluded the pre-1800 Ohio communal-type settlements of Native Americans and of the Moravians at Gnadenhutten (1746-1755), the book should not have failed to call attention to the significant nineteenth-century communities that follow: The Society of the United Germans, also known as Teutonia, formed by followers of Harmonist leader George Rapp who did not join his first community of Harmony, Pennsylvania, but settled at Bull Creek in Columbiana County, Ohio in 1803 and formed their own communal society from 1827 to 1831 under the leadership of Peter Kaufman along with other Harmonists who left Rapp's third village at Economy, Pennsylvania[1]; Oberlin Colony (1833-1841) founded simultaneously with Oberlin College by two missionaries, John Jay Shipherd and Philo Penfield Stewart thirty miles southwest of Cleveland in Lorrain County where the communal colony was to be a "model of Christian piety for the people of the Old West, while the college would train young men and women for labor in that vast vineyard of the Lord."[2]; the Community of United Christians at Berea (1836-1837) in Cuyahoga County; Highland Home (1844) in Zanesville; at least seven communal colonies founded by the anti-slavery movement in Mercer, Jefferson, and Brown counties from the 1830s to the 1850s, in which slaves freed in Virginia and Kentucky were held humanely for a time in way stations intended to acclimate them gradually to a life of freedom, before permanently releasing them into American society[3]; the society of Hygeiana (in the 1850s), led by a Dr. Thrall in Chillicothe; the Christian Republic (1865-1866) in Berlin; and the Salvation Army unemployment community at Fort Herrick (1898-1910).[4]

Minor errors include the mis-stating of dates. For instance, the ending date for the North Union Shakers is listed as 1898 rather than 1889 [p. 6], and 1953 is given as the original publication date of Arthur Bestor's well-known *Backwoods Utopias*, rather than the correct date of 1950 (p. 151). The author refers to Württemberg, the original German home of the Zoarites and Harmonists, as "Wurtemberg."

Major errors of fact include mistaking of the Harmonists' third town of Economy for their first town of Harmony in Pennsylvania, listing the name Economy twice, and giving the false and confusing impression that: "[t]hey stayed at Economy for ten years and then moved to New Harmony, Indiana. After a decade at New Harmony, they sold their land to socialist Robert Owen, [...]. The Rappites then returned to Economy, [...]" (p. 55). It is difficult to imagine that a scholarly treatment of the communal phase of Owenism could fail to mention that Robert Owen's temporary adoption of the communal method of organizing his socialist movement resulted from his learning of the economic success of the Shaker and Harmonist communities, that his millennialism differed markedly from theirs, that Owen's intent to produce human happiness worldwide can be treated without using his own utopian term ("the New Moral World"), that he can be said to have purchased 200 (rather than the actual 180) buildings in Harmonist New Harmony, Indiana, and that William Maclure can be wrongly labeled a teacher–when he was actually Owen's partner in the New Harmony venture. Maclure, in fact, brought the famous scientists and teachers to New Harmony, and created great interest in this first Owenite experiment,

which many viewed as a center for progressive education and scientific discovery (pp.112-13).

Rokicky is right to suggest that "[t]he combination and intensity of religious, reform, and utopian activity was unique to the nineteenth century" (p. 150). But she is wrong to leave the impression that people in Ohio and across the nation did not retain the experimental urge to improve their lives, that would lead thousands again and again to try the generic communal method of social change, and to experience warm fellowship and security in intentional communities throughout the twentieth century, to the present day. Evidence of a continuing tradition of communal experiments is far too great for this book to have repeated the same misjudgment of much earlier historians[5], in stating that: "American individualism, economic realities, and lack of leadership were forces too difficult to overcome, and the utopias ceased to exist " (p. 150). In reality, people in Ohio today host numerous intentional communities based on a myriad of secular and religious ideologies and cooperative economies–from Catholic religious orders, retirement centers, and co-housing units, to land trusts and eco-villages. Recent examples include the Catholic Worker Community of Cleveland, Currents in Glouster, Deep Woods Farm at South Bloomington, Far Valley and Sunflower Farm in Amesville, Middle Earth at West Union, Moonridge in Guysville, New Covenant Fellowship at Athens, New Jerusalem Community in Cincinnati, Raven Rocks in southeastern Ohio, the Susan B. Anthony Memorial Unrest Home at Millfield, and The Vale in Yellow Springs.[6]

One regrets that this volume falls short of being the much needed history of communal utopias in Ohio and that it does not fulfill its dust jacket promise to provide "students, scholars, and the interested public with a new, fuller picture of the development of Ohio life."

Notes:

[1]. See Karl J. R. Arndt, George Rapp's *Harmony Society, 1785-1847*. Rutherford, New Jersey: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1965. Rev. ed., 1972.

[2]. John Barnard, *From Evangelicalism to Progressivism At Oberlin College, 1866-1917*. Columbus: The Ohio State University Press, 1969, p. 3.

[3]. William H. and Jane H. Pease, *Black Utopia: Negro Communal Experiments in America*. Madison: State Historical Society of Wisconsin, 1963. Paperback ed., 1972.

[4]. Donald E. Pitzer, ed., *America's Communal Utopias*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997, 449-92.

[5]. For example, Everett Webber titled the last chapter "The Song Is Done" in his 1959 *Escape to Utopia: The Communal Movement in America*.

[6]. See *Communities Directory: A Guide to Communal Living*. Ann Arbor, Michigan: Printed by Cushing-Malloy for the Fellowship for Intentional Community, 1995, 2nd. ed., pp. 211-326.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the list discussion logs at:
http://h-net.msu.edu/cgi-bin/logbrowse.pl.

Citation: Donald E. Pitzer. Review of Rokicky, Catherine M., *Creating A Perfect World: Religious and Secular Utopias in Nineteenth-Century Ohio*. H-Communal-Societies, H-Net Reviews. December, 2002.
URL: http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=7058

Copyright © 2002 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu.