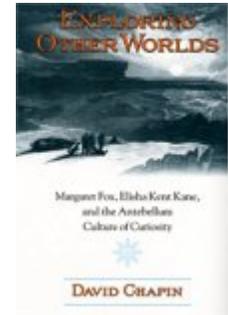


**David Chapin.** *Exploring Other Worlds: Margaret Fox, Elisha Kent Kane, and the Antebellum Culture of Curiosity.* Amherst and Boston: University of Massachusetts Press, 2004. vii + 258 pp. \$80.00, cloth, ISBN 978-1-55849-448-0.



**Reviewed by** Richard Powell

**Published on** H-HistGeog (March, 2006)

When Elisha Kent Kane died in Cuba in February 1857, less than two years after returning from the Second U.S. Grinnell Expedition (1853-1855) to the Arctic, he had become one of most celebrated public figures in America. The circuitous route of his funeral procession from Havana to Philadelphia encountered huge crowds in a number of major cities. As historian David Chapin argues, in drawing unprecedented commemoration across states divided along social, racial, and political lines, Kane was "a unifier of the nation" (p. 197).

It is thus not really surprising that many of Kane's peers were incredulous at suggestions of his engagement, and even secret marriage, to Margaret Fox, one of three sisters who had created the phenomenon of American spiritualism. Beginning as a teenage prank in Hydesville, New York, in 1848, the Fox sisters quickly graduated to deceiving large audiences in the northeast states over their abilities to communicate with spirits from "other worlds." By using the toe-joint to make a rapping sound, together with adept reading of gullible participants, the sisters were able

to construct a lucrative career. Although Margaret had an ambivalent relationship with rapping, especially with the later initiation of the séance, the development of philosophies of spiritualism and evangelism became entangled in this adolescent conceit.

The relationship between Fox and Kane is deployed to illustrate what Chapin terms the "culture of curiosity" in antebellum America (p. 5). By the middle of the nineteenth century, urbanization and the consolidation of wage labor had created the beginnings of a mass consumer economy. Combining "ideals of Republican virtue" and "commercial profit," a new leisure culture emerged that stressed goals of entertainment with educational improvement (p. 5). Forms of amusement had to possess a "moral justification" (p. 8). Lectures, museums, and séances were attractive because they facilitated a perception of social probity that distracted from the political squabbles of the antebellum states.

The crux of Chapin's argument is the contention that the "lines between science and sensation were fluid" in the years before the U.S. Civil

War (p. 7). What linked exploration and spirit-rapping, for Chapin, is that both *democratized* the notion of audience. Margaret and her sisters were, literally, only "mediums" acting on behalf of spirits (p. 97). Chapin successfully makes the case that both skeptics and believers were attracted to the spirit performances because the arenas allowed them to decide about their veracity for themselves. Rather than deferring to expert authority, it gave the "audience the active role" (p. 97).

Given the spectacular nature of the Arctic landscape, Kane's accounts of exploration were received in similar ways. When Kane presented public lectures based on the First U.S. Grinnell expedition (May 1850-September 1851), attendees could arbitrate as to whether the search for missing English explorer Sir John Franklin was futile (p. 101). Similarly, Kane's return from his second Arctic expedition in 1855 allowed the public to become involved in discussion of the theory of the Open Polar Sea (that is, that milder waters, supporting plant and animal life, would be found at the poles).

Although this culture created the careers of both Arctic explorer and spirit medium as new forms of celebrity, it also fostered the seeds of its own downfall. Chapin documents at length the ways in which Kane and especially Fox were destroyed as curiosity intruded into their private lives and impeded a halting romance begun after a chance Philadelphia meeting in late November 1852. As Chapin argues, it is precisely "the inherent conflict between these opposed aspects of the culture of curiosity" that makes the relationship between Kane and Fox compelling (p. 8).

Notwithstanding cultures of curiosity, anxieties about social class pervaded antebellum society. In some fascinating sections, Chapin examines the ways in which Margaret Fox was given glimpses of different lives through her fame, but was ultimately unable to transcend the traditional role attributed by gender and social standing. Chapin shows how Kane's family was opposed to

suggestions of a marital union, and how Kane recruited friends, clandestine meetings, and improvement tutors to support his romantic project. Kane expected Fox to acquiesce to his benevolent paternalism. Elsewhere, Chapin details how the same attitude to perceived social inferiors led to serious problems with the crew and Inuit encountered during the Second Grinnell Expedition.

The book is genuinely readable and carried along by some fascinating detail. The sixteen illustrations are, in the main, satisfactory, being copies of daguerreotypes and artist sketches of the main characters reproduced from various nineteenth-century accounts. However, the only map enclosed by Chapin is misleading. Although resolutely focused on Lancaster Sound and the surrounding islands, it is erroneously labeled "The Arctic" (map inserted between p. 120 and p. 121).

In many ways, then, the book deploys an approach similar to the "geographical biography" that David Livingstone encouraged historical geographers to adopt. For Livingstone, such geographical biographies would proceed by "situating a life in its spatial circumstances." [1] These biographies are to form part of a much wider desire by social and cultural historians to attend to the geographies of reading and textual reception. [2] In presenting a vivid account of "the relationships between Kane, Fox, and their audiences," Chapin provides an unwitting test case (p. 9).

Whether Chapin deserves to be read by those who are not interested in the respective histories of Arctic exploration, spiritualism, or nineteenth-century America is a moot question. Any efforts to attract historical geographers appear half-hearted. Despite frequent reference to the notion that both the mind and Arctic landscapes were perceived to be "undiscovered countries" in antebellum America (pp. 5, 53), and citations of the work of geographer J. K. Wright (pp. 230-231), Chapin does not develop some interesting, but dispiritingly brief, comparisons drawn between the "geogra-

phy of the globe" and "the geography of the mind and soul" (p. 30).

But this is probably unfair. This is an engaging story and should be judged in those terms. Chapin successfully demonstrates the advantages of solid, cultural history. The spaces of two interconnecting lives are engagingly described here: the private and the personal, the study and the field, even the body and the soul. The geographies inculcated in the relationship between Kane and Fox were peculiar and fascinating. As an attempt at geographical biography, this is far from definitive. For an enjoyable exposition of the development of American cultures of curiosity and the curse of celebrity, Chapin deserves our praise.

#### Notes

[1]. David N. Livingstone, *Science, Space and Hermeneutics: Hettner-Lecture 2001* (Heidelberg: Department of Geography, University of Heidelberg, 2002), pp. 34-35.

[2]. For a good summary of these debates, see James A. Secord, "Knowledge in transit," *Isis* 95 (2004): pp. 654-672.

Copyright (c) 2006 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 other uses contact the Reviews editorial staff: [hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu](mailto:hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu).

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at <https://networks.h-net.org/h-histgeog>

**Citation:** Richard Powell. Review of Chapin, David. *Exploring Other Worlds: Margaret Fox, Elisha Kent Kane, and the Antebellum Culture of Curiosity*. H-HistGeog, H-Net Reviews. March, 2006.

**URL:** <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=11490>



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