

David W. Kriebel. *Powwowing among the Pennsylvania Dutch: A Traditional Medical Practice in the Modern World.* Pennsylvania German History and Culture Series. University Park: Penn State University Press, 2016. 312 pp. \$35.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-271-03213-9.

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In the farmland and forested hollows of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century eastern Pennsylvania, German settlers, usually referred to as the Pennsylvania Dutch, adapted Old World techniques of faith healing to their new home. The tradition that emerged, known as powwowing, was a mix of faith, prayer, incantations, and occasional resort to items thought to possess healing properties. The task anthropologist David W. Kriebel undertook incorporated historical research, folk studies, and traditional anthropological approaches into his study of this vanishing, though as he makes clear throughout, not yet vanished, folkway. His methodology utilized newspaper accounts of practitioners, the few published guides to and histories of powwowing, and interviews with patients and practitioners of powwowing. The result of Kriebel's multifaceted approach is a curious hybrid; the book offers readers a scholarly examination of powwowing in Pennsylvania even as the work also profits from what might be described as a sort of spookiness in portions of the narrative, a quality that some readers, familiar with the villages and mountains of rural eastern Pennsylvania, will especially appreciate. *Powwowing among the Pennsylvania Dutch* is organized logically, though the narrative is not strictly chronological and the reader must take care to

understand that the subject matter does not readily lend itself to a linear model. In any case, Kriebel never indicates that his work is a formal history of powwowing. Rather, his study is an account of the practice during its introduction to the region, maturation during the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, and decline, but by no means disappearance, in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

The persistence of powwowing is indicative of a number of factors in the evolving folkways and religious beliefs of the Pennsylvania Dutch over the course of almost four centuries. Powwowing emerged from two distinct strands of experience: the power of a belief in God and the ineffectiveness of what passed for medicine until almost the end of the nineteenth century. These two factors are inimical to understanding the practice of powwowing, and ignoring either undermines any attempt to come to grips with a practice that is not only increasingly obscure and by its nature secretive, but also reduced in the number of its practitioners and patients. It is perhaps the first factor, a belief in God and the power of the powwower to use their belief to effect healing, that stymies the academic researcher most. For the scholar steeped in abstract, but rational thought, their work is judged upon conclusions drawn

from empirical evidence. However, since the injection of religious faith is a prerequisite for successful powwowing—indeed powwowers refuse to attempt healing on a faithless person—explaining the many accounts of successful cures is difficult. To his credit, Kriebel manages to sidestep the un-measurable, and therefore unanswerable, role of the supernatural by explaining the well-understood power of the placebo effect and spontaneous healing. The supernatural experience he leaves to those actually involved in powwowing as a factor beyond the ability of scholars to understand. The author's sensitivity in handling this portion of powwowing finds Kriebel at his most intellectually open moment; he refuses to discount the power of the supernatural even as he avoids entangling his work too deeply in an essentially spiritual argument.

Powwowing among the Pennsylvania Dutch is an engaging read that illustrates the longevity of folkways within American ethnic groups despite the changes in the larger worlds of medicine and culture. If readers approach Kriebel's work anticipating a traditional scholarly history, they will be disappointed; neither the topic nor the narrative lend themselves to a straightforward analysis. If, however, readers wish to broaden their knowledge of Pennsylvania Dutch culture and, importantly, the spirit of Dutch Country, then Kriebel's work merits careful examination.

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