

Meredith Marie Neuman. *Jeremiah's Scribes: Creating Sermon Literature in Puritan New England.*

Margaret Kruesi

Volume 77-78, 2013

URI : https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/mcr77_78br01

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

Cape Breton University Press

ISSN

1718-1259 (imprimé)

0000-0000 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer ce compte rendu

Kruesi, M. (2013). Compte rendu de [Meredith Marie Neuman. *Jeremiah's Scribes: Creating Sermon Literature in Puritan New England.*] *Material Culture Review*, 77-78, 191–192.

Comptes rendus de livre

MARGARET KRUESI

Review of

Neuman, Meredith Marie. 2013. *Jeremiah's Scribes: Creating Sermon Literature in Puritan New England*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.

Pp. 288, 10 illustrations, hardcover, ISBN 9780812245059, \$69.95.

As primary sources for this intriguing book, Meredith Marie Neuman examined manuscript notebooks of Puritan auditors of sermons that were delivered in colonial meeting houses in New England from the 1630s to the 1690s. Recognizing the limitation that “the greatest obstacle in understanding 17th-century New England sermon literature and culture is simply that we do not have easy access to the oral tradition that was its heart” (p. 8), she emphasizes the evidentiary value of these notebooks: “Lay sermon notes do not reconstruct ‘authentic’ oral performance; rather, they constitute a material record of discrete acts of listening that occur within specific communities of interpreters” (98). Her analysis of the aural experience, the ability of some note-takers to capture rhythms of the minister’s oral delivery and some lapses in attention to the minister’s words is significant. Furthermore, Neuman does an excellent job of presenting photographic illustrations of these manuscripts, along with her transcriptions of the manuscript pages, thus drawing our attention to the value of the materiality of historical manuscripts’ penmanship, orthography, shorthand, use of pen and ink and speculation about whether note-taking took place in the meeting during the sermon or afterwards.

I’ve spent many hours cataloguing early modern manuscripts, so I share Neuman’s deep appreciation of the material value of the physical, not just textual, information in these sources. I am also struck by the technological divide between the sources Neuman works with and 20th- and 21st-century audiovisual sources for the study of

vernacular sermons—we have hundreds of hours of audio recordings of sermons at the American Folklife Center. Scholars of religious life of the 19th century and earlier must rely entirely on print and manuscript sources. Still, audio recordings of sermons were generally made by outsiders to the sermon traditions they captured, whereas Neuman is able to add to our understanding of Puritan communities from within, by introducing us to auditors whose notes are evidence “of the phenomenal event of the sermon and its subsequent dissemination in the lives and texts of the community. The relationship between auditor and sermon was far from passive” (p. 8).

Neuman’s strategy of creating personas for the anonymous notetakers such as “Correcting Auditor,” “Disposition Auditor” and “Elegant Auditor” in chapter two makes it more difficult to follow the comparisons she makes; I would have preferred that the notebooks be identified as objects by date and place. Another weakness is that her focus “away from content” (p. 30) is so complete that 17th-century beliefs and Puritan believers almost vanish, and the book might therefore have less value in a Religious Studies curriculum than it has for graduate courses in 17th-century literature and the history of the book. A description of the architectural setting of the meeting houses would aid readers in imagining the spaces where these sermons were delivered and recorded. Neuman’s final chapter, “Narrating the Soul,” on the relationship between the genre of the conversion narrative and the sermon is particularly strong and brings the reader to a closer understanding of the “soul’s story”

rather than the “self’s story” (p. 185). Neuman’s notes and references are extensive and provide valuable leads for anyone wishing to delve into

the primary sources or the current scholarship on early American literature and religion.

BRIAN OSBORNE

Review of

James, William Closson. 2011. *God’s Plenty: Religious Diversity in Kingston*. Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press.

Pp. 472, black and white photographs, paperback, ISBN 9780773539259, \$34.95.

William Closson James’s foray into the diversity of religions in his home community, Kingston, Ontario, prompted someone to remark, “Religious diversity in Kingston? Is there any” (p. 213)? Certainly, it’s a fair question. The 2001 census data for visible minorities reported Kingston had less than 5 per cent, Ontario 20 per cent, and Toronto 37 per cent; and only 12 per cent of Kingston’s population were foreign-born, as opposed to Toronto’s 40 per cent. Accordingly, Kingston’s skyline is punctuated by the material cityscape of spires and steeples, towers and domes of the “PLURA”—Presbyterians, Lutheran, United, Roman Catholics, Anglicans—that formerly dominated the intangibilities of the theological and political culture of the city. Indeed, in approaching the religious “character” of this “mid-sized” place through the imagination of several of Kingston’s fiction writers, James seeks to “plumb the depths of spiritual mysteries and the nature of belief amidst the prosaic features of an ordinary Kingston setting” (5). For me, the best is Robertson Davies’s skewer of the community: it’s “the place where Anglican clergymen go when they die!”

But, for students of both material and intangible heritage, these architectural and psychological religious determinants have been eroded physically and symbolically in recent decades. Visually, the spires, towers and domes of Kingston still dominate the city’s skylines and streetscapes, but their significance has changed. Yet, as *God’s Plenty* points out, while challenged by the growing secularization of society and the immigration of new and non-Christian faiths into 21st-century Canada,¹ religion and spirituality still manifest themselves in new ways in modern times. Professor James should know. His four decades of residence and participation in

Kingston’s religious life have here been enhanced by more than one hundred interviews with representatives of Kingston’s religious groups, and enriched by his scholarly investigation of contemporary trends.

But, again, why Kingston? Certainly, it is unique and not representative of the current Canadian polity. With a metropolitan population of a mere 150,000 and a putative Anglo-Celtic culture, it would appear to not have experienced the religious diversity associated with the growing multiculturalism and trans-nationalism introduced by immigration to larger centres. That said, *God’s Plenty* sets the path for studies of religious trends in other mid-sized cities in Canada in three ways: its record and analysis of the praxis of established religions in Kingston; its record and analysis of less mainstream religions; and its examination of the degree to which religion has left the public sphere and become more a matter of private, personal concern. Availing himself of foundational works on Kingston’s religion by other scholars, and spicing his research with personal vignettes and lively anecdote, James employs an essentially ethnographic and phenomenological exploration of what it means to be an adherent of particular religions. In doing so, he contextualizes the shift away from discussion of theological issues in the growing secularism and the overall trend toward individual, private belief systems.

While the burning issues for Anglicans and Presbyterians have been same-sex marriages, civil unions, ordination of gays, and dwindling and aging congregations, others of PLURA lean to more liberal doctrinal matters and such as modern secular humanistic concerns with inclusivity, social justice and democratic procedures. As a group, they are all struggling to reconcile tradi-