

Book Reviews

Enchanted Ground: The Spirit Room of Jonathan Koons. By Sharon Hatfield. (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2018. 342 pp. Cloth \$28.95, ISBN 978-0-8040-1208-9.)

Jonathan Koons, a nineteenth-century medium living in rural southeast Ohio, is considered by many historians to be the first person in the spiritualist movement to develop “direct voice” communication with spirits (76), yet his story is overshadowed by more famous—and often controversial—mediums of the time, such as the Fox sisters of Rochester, New York, and the Davenport brothers of Buffalo. In *Enchanted Ground*, journalist and nonfiction writer Sharon Hatfield crafts a colorful and meticulously researched story that demonstrates the significant influence of Koons and his family of mediums on the spiritualist movement in the United States.

Hatfield begins with a vivid description of a séance in Jonathan Koons’s Spirit Room, a rustic log cabin outside of Athens, and weaves the story of how Koons, a humble fiddle-playing farmer with a keen interest in religion and philosophy, and his family began communicating with the spirit world in 1852 in a manner that attracted national and international attention. In the Spirit Room, Koons, his wife Abigail, son Nahum, and daughter Quintilla led dark séances that treated visitors to otherworldly concerts, glowing disembodied hands, mysterious writings, and direct communication with an ancient spirit through a trumpet. Believers and skeptics alike flocked to Athens to witness the sights themselves, and Koons’s folksy, unassuming character and natural charisma made him a welcome addition in a variety of social circles.

Koons quickly rose as a prominent figure in the spiritualist movement and traveled as far as New York City to hold séances for eager crowds, but this attention brought increased scrutiny as well. The Koons family dealt with efforts to discredit them during séances when skeptics attempted to prove the family was behind the phenomena and through letters to spiritualist periodicals painting them as frauds. Although Koons had many staunch defenders,

the steady stream of attacks took a toll on the family and public performances came to a halt. The Koons family eventually moved to southern Illinois in 1858 where Jonathan continued to explore spiritual issues and maintained the authenticity of his mediumship until his death in 1893.

Hatfield places Koons's actions and the modern spiritualist movement in a broad context, allowing the reader to understand how industrialization, advances in technology and transportation, westward expansion, social movements, and the Second Great Awakening religious revival all played a role in the growth of spiritualism. Clear connections are made between Koons and other notable mediums of the time, and the significant impact Koons's Spirit Room and dark séances had on the spiritualist landscape in Ohio and beyond is unmistakable.

Through thorough research utilizing numerous archives, spiritualist newspapers, and family descendants, Hatfield addresses the question of whether Koons was "an unlikely scientist harnessing yet unknown powers of the universe, or . . . a charlatan of the highest order" (9) but smartly leaves the task of reaching an answer to the reader. However, it is easy for the reader to get lost in the particulars; the spiritualist web Jonathan Koons played a role in is so finely detailed that names, places, and events begin to blur together, and Koons's story occasionally gets lost in related but superfluous histories of other mediums or Athens County residents.

Nonetheless, Hatfield's *Enchanted Ground* provides an unbiased, rich story that situates the historic and consequential acts of "the Venerable Jonathan Koons" (262) and the events that took place in southeast Ohio in wider modern spiritualist and reform movement contexts. Whether Koons was a legitimate voice for the spirit world or a fraud may be inconsequential as Hatfield clearly illustrates the comfort, hope, and sense of community Koons's supporters found in his séances, imaginative stories, and ostensible ability to connect the living with the dead.

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AmeriCorps Local History Corps

Polonium in the Playhouse: The Manhattan Project's Secret Chemistry Work in Dayton, Ohio. By Linda Carrick Thomas. (Columbus: Trillium, an imprint of Ohio State University Press, 2017. 247 pp. Cloth \$29.95, ISBN 978-0-8142-1338-4.)

Those familiar with the Manhattan Project are likely to know some of the significant people and places involved. Names such as Robert Oppenheimer