

the person *behind* this activity. Relatively little consideration is given to Stead's personal life other than recounting factual information, and there is no attempt to explore the inner world of what must have been a fascinating and complicated psyche. Just as some biographies go too far in venturing into the territory of purely speculative psychoanalytic musings that are little more than best guesses disguised as penetrating psychological insights, Brown's portrait of Stead seems to go into the opposite direction, shying away from any effort to explain the inner workings of this remarkably complex character. Brown also refrains from offering much in the way of an assessment of the impact of this remarkable figure—how he was perceived by contemporaries, how the perception of Stead changed over the years, and what, if any, has been his lasting impact on journalism.

Each of these concerns is illustrated by the rather abrupt ending of the book. After devoting much attention to detailed accounts of Stead's various journalistic projects, Brown covers his death—as a passenger on the *Titanic*—in a single paragraph, the final paragraph of the book. Surely the end of such a full and eventful life, including its impact on family, friends, the field of journalism, and the nation as a whole, merits greater consideration than it is afforded here. That shortcoming notwithstanding, *W. T. Stead* is nonetheless a welcome contribution toward increasing the public profile of a remarkable figure in British journalism.

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The King of Confidence: A Tale of Utopian Dreamers, Frontier Schemers, True Believers, False Prophets, and the Murder of an American Monarch. By Miles Harvey. Little, Brown and Company, 2020. 416 pages. \$29.00 cloth; ebook available.

Miles Harvey's *The King of Confidence* is a retelling of the life and times of James Jesse Strang (1813–1856) and his self-proclaimed Mormon kingdom on an island in the middle of Lake Michigan during the nineteenth century. Strang was one of several claimants to the mantle of Joseph Smith Jr., founder of the Church of Jesus Christ of the Latter-Day Saints, in the wake of the prophet's murder in 1844. Strang, an immensely ambitious character, apparently had little exposure to Mormonism before his visit to Nauvoo, Illinois, shortly before Smith's demise. However, by dint of his charisma and a suspiciously timely letter from the prophet himself naming him successor, Strang managed to convince a small group of Mormons to follow him, first to Voree, Wisconsin, and then to the isolation of Beaver Island. Along the way, Strang bolstered his prophetic credentials by locating his own set of

ancient inscribed plates predicting his rise; producing his own set of revelations, *The Book of the Law of the Lord*; secretly practicing and then publicly proclaiming polygamy; and then having himself crowned “King of Heaven and Earth” in a public ceremony. He also ran a successful newspaper and served in the Michigan state legislature, all before being assassinated by a cabal of followers disgruntled because Strang commanded their wives to wear the Reform Dress—that is, bloomers.

For students of American new religious movements, the story of James Jesse Strang and the Strangite Mormons is well known and has generated a fair amount of scholarship over the years. In addition to the journal literature, the ground has been well covered by Milo Quaife’s *The Kingdom of St. James* (1930), Roger Van Nord’s *King of Beaver Island* (1988), and most recently, Vickie Cleverley Speek’s “*God Has Made Us a Kingdom*” (2006). Although Harvey’s *The King of Confidence* adds little new factual material to the story, the author’s primary goal was to produce a “ripping good yarn” for a popular audience by contextualizing Strang “as a kind of lightning rod for all the fierce enthusiasms and vibrant social movements of the antebellum era” (310). Judged on these terms, *The King of Confidence* is quite entertaining. Harvey writes in an engagingly popular, novelistic style that moves the story right along, and he heads each short chapter with amusingly verbose titles mimicking those of nineteenth-century romances. Moreover, Harvey adds interest by relating Strang’s life and obsessions to some of the larger cultural, political, and even technological currents of the day. Throughout the book, for example, Harvey relates Strang’s story to themes in the writings of Edgar Allen Poe, Nathaniel Hawthorne, and Ralph Waldo Emerson, and to the careers of John Brown and Millard Fillmore.

However, it is really the writings of Herman Melville, especially his novel, *The Confidence Man* (1857), and the “humbugs” of Phineas T. Barnum, that Harvey uses to set the overall tone of the book, and herein lies my problem with it, at least in terms of its potential scholarly or classroom use. That Strang was simply a confidence man and Strangism a conscious fraud may have been the case, but the same mocking skepticism is extended to all aspects of his movement—and, to some degree, to Mormonism in general. Empathy for Strang’s followers is remarkably lacking, and little time is spent in trying to understand the sociology and psychology of those attracted to this movement. Nor is much time spent exploring Strang’s beliefs and practices in any detail, leaving the reader with the great mystery of why anyone but rubes and dolts might have found his worldview satisfying.

I understand that *The King of Confidence* is not a textbook and was written to emphasize the more sensational aspects of Strang’s career in order to appeal to the readers of books about nineteenth-century true crime, such as Erik Larson’s *The Devil in the White City* (2003). And yet, as a scholar who teaches about new religious movements, I would have

been much more enthusiastic about a new book on Strang if it had combined Harvey's literary gifts with a more humane, less jeering approach to its subject. That would have been a book that I could have felt comfortable assigning to students, confident that the more bizarre aspects of the story would not bias them against a sincere attempt to understand the dreams and motivations of people who join new religious movements like Strangite Mormonism.

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Miracles of Our Own Making: A History of Paganism. By Liz Williams. Reaktion Books, 2020. 352 pages. £15.95 cloth; ebook available.

Miracles of Our Own: A History of Paganism bears a slightly misleading title. It is not a history of the Christian concept of paganism nor a history of modern Paganism as a whole. Rather, it is a (comparatively short) overview of modern Paganism in Britain coupled with a (much longer) discussion of various historical topics that are of particular interest to modern Pagan groups, such as the druids of the Iron Age, the witch trials of the early modern period, and the ceremonial magicians of the nineteenth century.

Although Liz Williams' credentials as the holder of a doctorate in the history and philosophy of science are presented on the jacket cover, *Miracles of Our Own Making* is not an academic work, nor does it claim to be. Instead it is a work of popular history, clearly aimed primarily at individuals who are new to modern Paganism but interested in deepening their involvement. To this end, Williams follows her historical discussion with a brief guide to performing a ritual (based loosely on the Wiccan model) alongside a list of advice to newcomers, urging them to avoid "cult-like" groups (323), to show caution around those demanding sex or money, and to be sensitive to issues of cultural appropriation. Williams has been involved in Pagan Druidry for many years and runs an esoteric store in Glastonbury, with her advice thus drawing on her own considerable experience in the British Pagan and esoteric scenes.

Although the book does not always draw upon the latest scholarship on the topics it discusses, and specialists in periods like the Iron Age and early medieval period would certainly find things to quibble about, it is noteworthy that the volume avoids many of the sweepingly incorrect claims that were once common in modern Pagan literature. Williams makes clear, for instance, that there is no evidence for pre-Christian polytheistic religions surviving into the high middle ages and beyond in Britain, a claim that was once fundamental to a wide range of Pagan groups.