

Doomsayers: Anglo-American Prophecy in the Age of Revolution. By SUSAN JUSTER. *Early American Studies*. (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003. Pp. x, 276. \$39.95.)

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“That a poor madman should be under such an unhappy delusion as to believe himself inspired, is not unprecedented; but that such a man, in so enlightened a city as London, should fill for a moment the public ear, and employ the public tongue, is a humiliating consideration for those who wish to feel proud of their country, or of human nature” (p. 179). This indictment of the London prophet Richard Brothers in a British periodical in 1795 neatly captures the plight of revolutionary-era British and American prophets that stands at the center of Susan Juster’s study of millenarianism between 1765 and 1815. Making use of the public sphere newly constituted by cheap print and coffeehouse discourse, her subjects struggled to steer a safe course for religious inspiration through the Age of Reason. Juster suggests that their journey was not necessarily destined for failure by insisting that the Enlightenment was not simply the dispassionate deployment of human reason against ignorance, superstition, and tyrannies religious and political. “The elusive admixture of primitive occult desires and modern intellectual conceits” is, she asserts, “a more accurate description of the phenomenon we simplistically call ‘the Enlightenment’” (p. 16). Juster’s analysis of the prophets’ failure to resolve the tensions inherent in this admixture and to reconcile the religious realm of feeling and experience with the qualities of civility and reason that undergirded post-revolutionary republicanism creates a new narrative for the history of Anglo-American millenarianism. She advances in fresh, sometimes startling, ways the important discussion of the subject opened by Ruth Bloch, Nathan Hatch, and others.

Armed with an admirable command of the relevant historiographies, Juster rejects the integrity of an unbroken millennialist tradition stretching from the radical sectarianism of the

English Civil War to the populist visionaries and dispensationalists of the nineteenth century. The 1790s, in particular, took Anglo-American prophets in new directions that represented distinct breaks with their seventeenth-century predecessors. Most aspects of their experimentation led to dead ends. When millenarianism was revived in the nineteenth century, it was by the likes of Joseph Smith and William Miller, visionaries who reprised the dramatic extravagance of the civil war sectarians in ways the prophets of the 1790s would never have dared. The revolutionary-era prophets did bequeath a legacy to their successors, however. The public sphere's building blocks of print culture and commercialization were at the center of nineteenth-century prophets' strategies to succeed in the emerging marketplace of religion.

As in the era of the English Civil War, the turmoil of the revolutionary age provided especially fertile soil for the flowering of religious experimentation infused with chiliasm. There is an understandable temptation to view the prophets of the late eighteenth century as faithful heirs of such apocalyptic and ecstatic sectarians as the Ranters, Muggletonians, and Fifth Monarchists. There were, to be sure, similarities. In both eras, prognostications of violence and doom figured large, divine inspiration was often signaled through kinetic expression, and prevailing constructions of gender were contested. The later cohort of prophets, however, was distinguished by its aspiration to align itself with, rather than against, the prevailing political and cultural power. Both republicanism and the Enlightenment encouraged that stance with the recognition of the individual's right to participation in government and capacity to perceive the truth for himself without the mediation of a didactic learned elite. Revolutionary-era visionaries with ordinary backgrounds proclaimed the accessibility of God's plan to all, and their unlikely emergence as prophets embodied the democratic nature of divine revelation.

While seventeenth-century religious radicals habitually condemned similar transformative movements of their age as diabolical corruptions, Juster's intrepid subjects embraced the new

vehicles of popular communication that constituted the public sphere and exploited the emerging commercialism of the age to promote their various brands of millenarianism. Brothers was a prolific author whose two-volume *Revealed Knowledge of the Prophecies and Times* (1794–1795) “made him instantly famous” to a public dubbed “the Misguided Million” (pp. 180–81) by one critic. A rival prophet, Susan Eyre, made use of the popular press to present the consumers of prophecy with alternative wares when she published a series of articles in a London daily in which she “essentially challenged Brothers to a prophets’ duel” (p. 194).

In harmony with the Enlightenment’s emphasis on the self, revolutionary-era prophets and their followers understood the relationship between the divine and the human minds and bodies with which it made direct contact in a new way. While late medieval and radical sectarian mysticism conceived of a union with the divine spirit that erased the boundary between self and God, prophets and religious enthusiasts in the Age of Enlightenment conceived of divine inspiration as a transgression across the boundary of the body, an invasion or a visitation on the self.

The men and women who attempted to stake prophecy’s claim to legitimacy in the revolutionary age make fascinating subjects, and Juster does not deny her readers the pleasure of getting to know some of them very well indeed. She devotes two chapters to a pair of vivid double portraits that illustrate both the commonalities and differences among the visionaries who entered the revolutionary-era cul-de-sac in the millenarian tradition. The lives and careers of British prophets Brothers and Joanna Southcott and Americans Nimrod Hughes and Jemima Wilkinson both represent the similarities that lay in the transatlantic movement and epitomize important cleavages. British prophets were creatures of the metropolis who gained contemporary notoriety and historical prominence through the attention of London’s energetic press. American prophets were geographically scattered and rarely achieved comparable national reputations. Some, including Wilkinson, retired to remote settings that contributed to their obscurity. And whereas male prophets

could at least claim rightful entry into the enlightened public sphere, female prophets were excluded and relied on older mystical traditions to legitimate their revelations. Wilkinson recapitulated late medieval mysticism's notion of divine possession when she claimed that her human soul had vacated its body permanently to give way to a divine presence named the "Publick Universal Friend." At the age of sixty-four, Southcott claimed that she was pregnant. She was evasive about the nature of the child she carried, but many of her followers believed it would be the messiah. The miraculous nature of both women's claims ultimately failed to substitute for the arguments of reason they were not allowed, as women, to engage.

Juster concludes that the 1790s offered prophets a "flexible intellectual environment" (p. 271) in which hard lines between religious and secular, spiritual and scientific were yet to be fixed. By 1815, these boundaries were drawn and well policed, and prophets retreated from their attempts to create an enlightened prophetic spirituality that appealed across class, gender, and even racial categories. In the end, none of the prophets of the revolutionary age—male or female—managed to find and keep a place in the enlightened public sphere of the emerging middle class. The audience for miraculous revelations and chiliastic predictions narrowed to the ranks of the poor and politically disaffected, and prophets with Enlightenment pretensions disappeared from the religious landscape. This original, richly textured book cannot offer those revolutionary-era doomsayers the universal audience they sought, but it gives them the place they deserve in the larger narrative of millenarianism and skillfully challenges comfortable notions about the historical interplay between faith and reason.