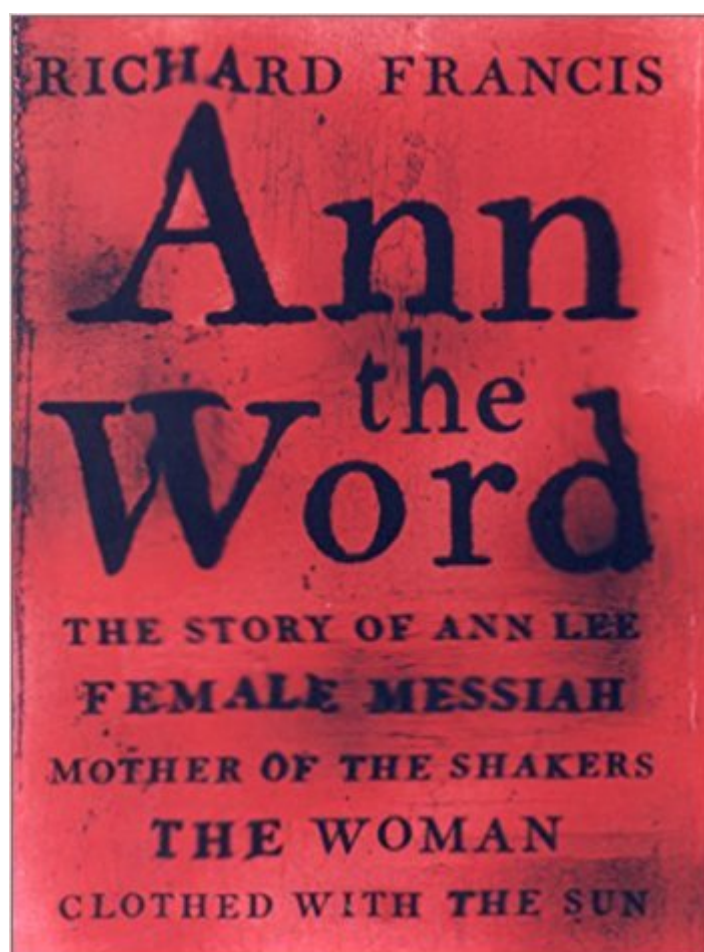


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Ann The Word: The Story Of Ann Lee, Female Messiah, Mother Of The Shakers



Synopsis

Ann Lee was one of the most extraordinary and mysterious women in the history of Western culture. From humble origins in Manchester, England, this illiterate daughter of a blacksmith became a visionary religious leader who was thought by her followers to be the second incarnation of Christ. She brought the Shaking Quakers, or Shakers, to America on the eve of the revolution. When she died at age 48, she left behind a religious movement that was to have thousands of followers and to become our most successful and important utopian community.

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Customer Reviews

Ann Lee (1736-1784) was an illiterate who left no records of her own, making the biographer's task a challenge. Francis has culled this entertaining profile from public records of Lee's many incarcerations for disorderly conduct (those early Shakers were a loud bunch) and her followers' glowing recollections. Francis dispels some myths about Lee, including the notion that she "founded" the Shaker movement, which had been going for 11 years before she converted in 1758. In 1770, she had a vision in which she saw herself as a Messiah figure, and thereafter assumed spiritual leadership, bringing a small flock of believers to America in 1774. Francis does a fine job of placing early Shakerism within the larger context of the Revolutionary War and gives long-overdue attention to the historical import of the "Dark Day" of 1780. Francis is a fine writer who vividly conjures the religious and social worlds of the 18th century, though his allusions to popular 20th-century entertainments (Monty Python, Stephen King and the movie Groundhog Day) are more

distracting than illustrative. The lack of citations of any kind is troublesome in a biography where so much of the "primary" source material was penned long after Lee's death; occasional glitches on Francis's part (e.g., calling the Anglican revivalist George Whitefield a Methodist) also undermine reader confidence. Despite these flaws, this is unquestionably the best and most absorbing biography of the irrepressible Shaker leader. Copyright 2001 Cahners Business Information, Inc.

"An elegantly written life of the enigmatic and powerfully charismatic Shaker prophet...a splendid account..." -- Kirkus, 4/15/01

Terrific read! There's a lot written about the Shakers, but little about Ann Lee, their founder. This book really fills in the blanks, and the author has some fascinating psychological takes on the subject. A must read for anyone at all interested in the Shakers and American History.

I was looking for a good book about Ann Lee and the Shakers in England and early America. This book is very thorough and does cover that time period. The author also uses source material and tries not to stray too far from that in his speculation about Ann Lee and the other first Shakers. I liked the detailed work and, clearly, a lot of research went into this. However, it came across as a bit dry for the most part and didn't really seem to give a feel for the Shakers or Ann, their leader, the Woman Clothed in the Sun. The author did speculate a bit about why she did this or that and how it might have stemmed from her early life as a married woman and the loss of her children and her attitudes towards sex and so on...but this psychological analysis fell flat at times. It didn't really seem to explain why she felt so strongly about what she was doing (enough to be imprisoned and ill-treated for her faith) and delve into the question of whether she was truly in touch with the divine or was caught up in it for her own personal reasons or unconscious issues or some combination of the two. I guess I was looking for something that explained more why the Shakers and Ann Lee believed as they did and what it meant to them to worship as they did...with dancing, shouting, strange singing and physical motions and actions, which resulted in divine revelations, visions, and other "gifts" of the spirit. It was pretty clear that this sort of faith has continued on within some modern day Christian sects...but this work didn't really very clearly address that or why it happened then and why it still happens today. It didn't seem to explain why Ann Lee was Ann Lee, the "female Christ." It was like reading the words of an outsider looking in at something and just not getting it...The book talked a little bit about the Quakers and their relationship to the Shakers...but it didn't delve very deeply into them or into the French (mainly female) prophets that came before them and

that the Quakers and Shakers were descended from or influenced by. I guess I missed a deeper exploration of having Ann Lee and the Shakers being placed within a larger context of religious thought and practice that went back centuries before them...Good for a research tool, but I would go on from here to read other works about Ann Lee and the Shakers.

Ann Lee (or Lees as she was born) is one of the most fascinating mystics in modern history. An illiterate born in Manchester, England in the early eighteenth century her life has been put together with confidence and flair by Richard Francis. Ann left no written records but Richard Francis has carefully pieced together what he can of her life from written records of the time and from her followers. Francis really gives us a feel for what life was like in Early Manchester from the population, to the role Ann's family played in the society to how they lived. It is a vivid portrait, he really brings his society to life, the crowded living, the social structure, and the society she dwelt in. It makes fascinating reading. She was a very charismatic person, who probably suffered from Anorexia Nervosa which may explain some of the mystical visions she had. Certainly her mortification of the flesh (refusing to eat for long periods of time, and denying herself sleep) is a symptom which many of history's mystics have employed to call visions of Christ. Ann's charisma soon saw her heading the local branch of Shakers, and even converting her own family to the religion, her own brother calling her sister and mother in one. This book is not just a biography of Ann, it is a record of early Shakerism, but also a substantial social history of Manchester and mid-eighteenth century America. Francis uses all the historical records available to attempt to flesh out the world which Ann inhabited and to strip away myth associated with her life (which she herself perpetuated) and the reality of what happened to her. I really enjoyed this. It was both well researched and well written. An easy read without the tabloidism of some historical non-fiction writers. Highly recommended.

Ann the Word deserves five stars for its fine writing, the extensive research, and a contextual narrative that helps us understand many events that otherwise seem unduly cruel and brutal. My five-star rating is balanced, however, by the one star awarded the author's annoying armchair psychology that intrudes at every turn - intended, it seems, to explain away anything that might be a little too difficult for the modern, sophisticated reader to swallow. The author is a somewhat gifted writer; he teaches creative writing and has published several previous books. But where this book fails is in its hubris; it is the hindsight of a nineteenth-century belief system that considers itself enlightened, while stubbornly maintaining a one-dimensional and materialistic tunnel vision of possibility. This book ascribes Ann Lee's blunt, often-accurate visions and prophecies to dumb luck,

coincidence, and cunningly applied homespun psychological manipulation. The author lacks the magnanimity to simply present the story as revealed through his research, while allowing the reader to decide what lay behind it all. Nevertheless, we see are privileged to witness the workings and outcome of a true cult and its gifted, charismatic leader. And, ultimately, we see that society needs such cults and fringe movements, places where those who will never fit into the social norms of the day can find a true sense of purpose and fulfillment. Despite the frequent and annoying pop-psychology and a certain shallowness, this is probably the best book available on the roots of Shakerism and Ann Lee.

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