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Book Review: Sterling F. Delano's Brook Farm

Sam Burcham

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The inherent scandal that a subtitle such as *The Dark Side of Utopia* suggests will leave readers who pick up Sterling F. Delano’s *Brook Farm* looking for debauchery amongst the members of this communal living experiment sorely disappointed. Readers will find no dark secrets stashed among the pages of this book. What they will find, however, is a chronological narrative that follows the Brook Farm community from its founding in 1841, to its undesired abandonment in 1847. The book, which Delano claims is “not only a corrective study,” but “a revisionary one as well,” attempts to fix the problems that he finds with the work of Lindsay Swift, who was, until Delano, the only real chronicler of the Brook Farm community (xi). Here, Delano suggests that Brook Farm’s failure was the result of natural phenomena and mounting debt, rather than the adoption of Fourierism, as Swift had previously suggested.

According to Delano, the initial idea for Brook Farm grew out of the Transcendental movement that had developed among a second generation of Unitarian ministers in New England. One such minister, George Ripley, was at the forefront of this movement. He became quite disenchanted with the nature of ministerial service. But religious woes were not his only concern, for he also desired reform for the society in which he lived. Of the
New England that Ripley observed, he stated that the “‘great danger of our country...is the inordinate pursuit, the extravagant worship of wealth.” (8) With this spirit of worldly and institutional rejection in tow, Ripley would resign his position as minister at Purchase Street Church in Boston, convinced that he would be able to serve God in a better way. His new service would be removed from the wealth driven society and from those who attacked the Transcendentalist rejection of traditional Christianity.

Ripley’s vision for a reformed society began with the hasty purchase of the Ellis Dairy Farm. Having garnered some support from a few investors, most notably the famous Nathaniel Hawthorne, the experiment placed the “community’s capital stock [at] $12,000” (69). The cost of purchasing the Ellis Farm, however, was $10, 500, expending all but $2,000 of the money pledged to Ripley’s vision. In light of such financial records, it is evident that monetary pressures plagued the Brook Farm community from the onset. With this in mind, it seems ironic that George Ripley, a man who wanted to reject the pursuit of wealth in favor of a more person-oriented communal environment, spent the majority of his time worrying about continually procuring money so as to keep his community alive.

Delano is careful not to let the foreknowledge of the community’s inevitable decline make his story one of failure, though. Instead, he presents the Brook Farmer’s (as the residents of this community were called) as hopeful reformists who strove to create meaningful lives for themselves here. Far from what the book’s subtitle suggests, Delano relates a relatively peaceable and happy bunch of Farmers who enjoyed living together. Such a sentiment is even evident in mundane events like mealtimes. Rebecca Codman, a lesser known Farmer, “remembered years later that mealtimes were a ‘pleasant social time; all joined in making the time spent at our meals the pleasantest part of the day’s intercourse’” (174). The Farmers agreeable attitudes were also cultivated through the belief that “all labor was sacred” (66). Men and women would be paid the same wages for a day’s work, and would also be able to choose what type of work they did. Therefore, women could chose to do manual labor, while men tended to domestic affairs, and vice versa. Further adding to the agreeable nature of the Brook Farmers was the fact that their constitution “guaranteed religious freedom and promised ‘perfect religious tolerance’” (243).

As Delano initially presents things, Brook Farm does seem as if it was the very utopia that Ripley hoped it to be. But there were those who were less enchanted with the Farm. Nathaniel Hawthorne, though originally a supporter of the experiment, had reservations towards the community. And Henry David Thoreau’s visit made him “more determined than ever not to compromise his independence for the purported conveniences of Associative life” (134). Dissenters were not the real problem, however. Again, financial pressures presented themselves to the Farmers, forcing them to join the Fourierist movement on January 7, 1844. Somehow, the brilliant Ripley had failed to capitalize on the exceptional school that had
been created at Brook Farm that could most likely have staved off any further financial troubles. Instead of utilizing the school, the community joined a larger majority of New Englanders who were attracted to Charles Fourier’s social ideas, inviting artisans and workingmen into the community. Their motives for hoping to become America’s model phalanx (Fourier’s ideal social community), were aimed at gaining funding from wealthy New York Fourierists in order to keep the Farm going. These hopes were never realized. An outbreak of smallpox in November of 1845, as well as a fire that destroyed the newly built phalanstry (a Fourierist community’s central dwelling place) a few months later, would create financial pressures that proved to be fatal. By early 1847, the community was all but abandoned.

Ultimately, Delano’s *Brook Farm: The Dark Side of Utopia* serves to study the rise and fall of Brook Farm as representative of the Transcendental movement as a whole. It is a metaphorical kind of study, as should be expected from Delano, a professor of American Literature. Since Delano is a literary scholar and not a historian, it is almost impossible to fit him into any one school of historiographical thought, though he might fall into the Revisionist school (as is his own admission). And while Delano does seek to revise Swift’s argument, he also hopes to suggest that although the experiment was a failure, this should not distract reader from the Farmer’s successes. Although the community’s existence was short, the strides made towards women’s rights, progressive education, and an egalitarian society did have quite the lasting impact.

Sam Burcham