Aaron Spencer Fogleman


The past two decades have given rise to a veritable explosion of scholarship on Moravian activity in the early modern Atlantic world. Long relegated to the margins of historical inquiry, Moravians are now moving closer to center stage thanks to scholars like Jon Sensbach, Rachel Wheeler, Jane Merritt, and Katherine Carte Engel. Aaron Fogleman has been a major, if not the major, historian in this shift, but his new book takes a slightly different tack, writing a biography of a spiritual couple whose history intertwined with the Moravians. The result is a fascinating look into the complicated mingling of religious figures that the creation of the Atlantic world engendered.

The central characters are an eighteenth-century couple with transatlantic pietist connections. Fogleman depicts Jean François Reynier as smart, competent, charismatic, and a brilliant practitioner of medicine, which made him a popular figure nearly everywhere he went. Associates quickly realized, however, that he was also arrogant, stubborn, prickly, contemptuous, and, well, troublesome. He had an insatiable desire for achieving his interpretation of spiritual perfection, and no qualms about challenging existing political and religious leaders. In fact, his most memorable act was penning and publishing a scathing, widely circulated indictment of the Moravian leadership, theology, and lifestyle that he eventually came to despise. His wife, Maria Barbara Knoll, less cantankerous, constantly struggled between her desire to find a stable religious community and her effort to be a good wife to a quarrelsome and fiercely independent man.

The book’s first section highlights Jean François’s upbringing among French-Swiss Huguenots in Switzerland and his subsequent transatlantic voyages to Pennsylvania and Georgia. Fogleman then briefly explores Maria Barbara’s backstory as a German Lutheran orphan desperately searching for a communitarian ideal among the Moravians, and her marriage to Jean François. The Caribbean takes center stage in the third section, as the Reyniers traveled to Suriname and then St. Thomas to preach, heal, and cultivate a religious community. The book ends with their travels to North America, their increasing conflicts with Moravian communities there, and the growing animosity they developed toward one another. The most fascinating aspect of this story may in fact be their rocky marriage. Almost always on the brink of divorce near the end of their lives, the couple came to establish a kind of truce whereby they were still married but ultimately separated in their activities.
 readers will be most interested in the Reyniers’ experiences in Suriname and St. Thomas. They were sent to an embryonic mission in Suriname in 1740 at the behest of the Moravian leadership in Marienborn. Here Fogleman adds depth and nuance to the kinds of experiences and encounters in Suriname described by Richard Price and Natalie Zemon Davis and in the Danish Caribbean islands by Jon Sensbach. For the Reyniers, Suriname represented an ill-fated, nearly fatal, missionary experience. Dutch officials were extremely concerned about religious proselytizing in that slave society and aggressive diseases frequently swept through Paramaribo, upriver, and into the slave plantations in the backcountry, one of which was operated by the Reyniers themselves. The Reyniers survived, but they experienced manifold conflicts with other religious figures, as well as with each other.

St. Thomas was an entirely different experience. The couple was actually headed to New York, but Jean François got into a spat with the ship’s captain, who left the couple stranded on a Caribbean island. After making their way to St. Thomas, they quickly established themselves as energetic participants in the Moravian mission there. Fogleman contends that although St. Thomas was a plantation-based slave society like Suriname, the religious dynamics there played out very differently, with Danish officials and plantation owners accepting, and sometimes even welcoming, Moravian missionary work. This was largely the result of a Moravian pledge to emphasize slave obedience rather than Christian liberation. Fogleman contends that this factor, along with the practice of using individual slaves as evangelists and the financial sustainability and independence of their mission, ensured its success. And, even though the Reyniers faced a devastating epidemiological environment similar to the one in Suriname, they were able to survive and establish themselves as medical practitioners and healers.

Fogleman’s arguments are well founded. He has mined countless sources in multiple languages from archives in the United States, Germany, and Switzerland, and included a remarkable amount of detail, discussing everything from acorn diets and sexual practices to transportation networks and marine life. By telling this story from the angle of a married couple who tried to change the Atlantic world but were instead swept up in it, he has written an evocative and insightful microhistory that adds depth to our understanding of the integration of the Atlantic. This book is recommended for anyone interested in early American and Caribbean history, and is essential reading for those who study interfaith and intercultural encounters in the early modern Atlantic world.

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