Maine History

Volume 30 | Number 1 Article 15

6-1-1990

# Fair Clear and Terrible

Randall H. Bennett
*Bethel Historical Society*

history should not be treated as a separate category. Here, quite rightly, the constant interplay of religion, society, and politics is properly recognized.

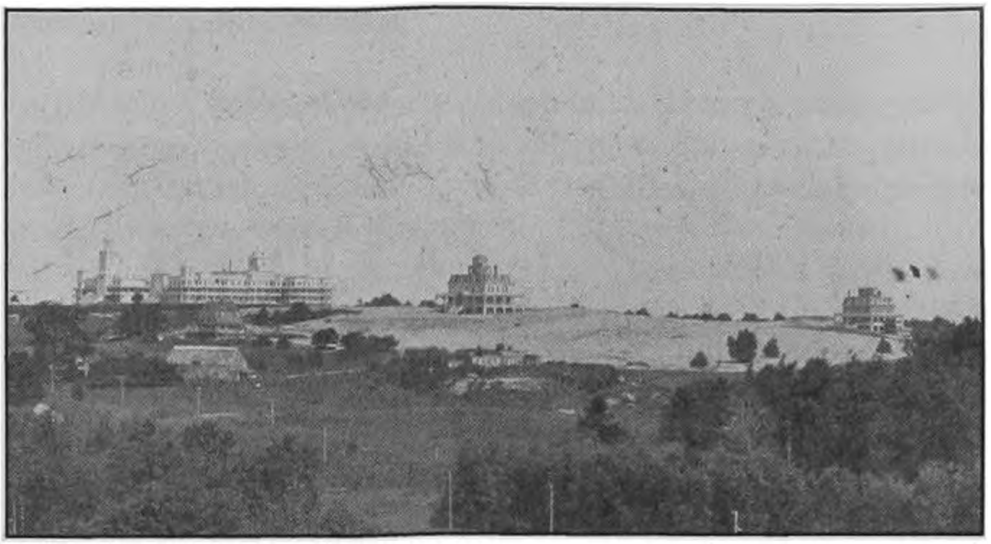
R. C. Richardson
King Alfred's College
Winchester, England

*Fair Clear and Terrible: The Story of Shiloh, Maine.* By Shirley Nelson. (Latham, N.Y.: British American Publishing, 1989. Pp. x + 447. $21.95.)

In *Fair Clear and Terrible,* novelist Shirley Nelson weaves the captivating but often shocking story of a southern Maine religious colony that proposed to transform the world but instead ended in confusion and disaster. Though Nelson's family were participants — caught up in the impassioned belief in the Second Coming of Christ, as interpreted by their movement's leader, Frank Weston Sandford — her work is told with objectivity and grace, not an easy task considering the rather volatile subject matter.

Centered for its twenty-five year history on a cluster of turreted buildings atop a sandy hill at Durham, the "Holy Ghost and Us Bible Society" began its lofty efforts in 1896. Soon after the completion of its main building, a mansard-roofed structure with a seven-story tower topped with a gold crown (called by Holman Day, then a star among the *Lewiston Journal's* reporters, "one of the showiest places of Androscoggin County"), the colony became known as "Shiloh" (which many Christians saw as a reference to the first coming of Christ). The name Sandford was chosen for its castle-like headquarters.

To understand how Shiloh came into being and why it spawned controversy throughout its existence, one needs to delve into the mind of Frank Sandford, its founder. Author



The Shiloh Colony, home of the Holy Ghost and Us Bible Society in Durham, Maine, awaits the second coming of Christ in this turn-of-the-century photograph. Courtesy Androscoggin Historical Society.

Nelson masterfully captures the inner dimensions of his religious ferment through the assiduous use of a number of valuable sources, not least of which is an impressive number of interviews with actual participants or their survivors.

Born October 2, 1862, at Bowdoinham, Frank Sandford early on displayed a self-assurance that was to serve him well in the days ahead. (Nelson suggests that the premature death of Sandford's father in 1876 was partly the cause.) He attended the Theological Department at Bates College and soon found himself at Topsham, preaching, but concerned more and more with "personal sanctification, the transcendence of the sinful, recalcitrant self." With the help of Hannah Whitall Smith's powerful *The Christian's Secret of a Happy Life* (in which she urged the "emptying of self, the laying aside of every burden — health, reputation, houses, children, business ... " in determining God's will) and the preaching of the Rev. Albert B. Simpson of New York at the Methodist campground near Old Orchard (where divine healing received much emphasis), Sandford "came away a changed man."

Guided by "whisperings from the Holy Spirit," Sandford soon directed a frenzy of evangelical activity, first in Maine, then in Boston, and finally across the Atlantic, where a series of sea voyages began to tap the limited resources at Durham.

Admitting that he daily struggled against the dangers of "independent thinking and reasoning," Sandford held sway in demanding rigorous fasts and purges for the Shiloh community, which, for those at the colony, resulted in a pervading sense of anxiety about their spiritual condition. Diverting precious funds to such things as golden harps and a sailing yacht, the *Coronet,* Sandford, in what some dissenters from the community later called a "hypnotic spell," maintained a rigid set of standards including the repudiation of professional medical care. Inevitably, the disasters multiplied, resulting in death after death on land and on sea. Sandford eventually found himself on trial for cruelty and manslaughter, and was finally sentenced to prison.

If it were only for the historical record of a Maine religious movement it provides, *Fair Clear and Terrible* would possess significance. But, in analyzing the period in which Shiloh blossomed and then withered, Shirley Nelson provides insight into how masses of people, regardless of nationality or belief, are often manipulated into blind, unquestioning loyalty by powerful, charismatic personalities. In this sense, the story of Shiloh is not unlike that of several modern-day religious groups whose leaders, for one reason or another, have led them to self-destruction.

The book is not without its flaws, most noticeable of which is the lack of an index, although an extensive bibliography is included. The text is enhanced with a number of good photographs and maps, though under two illustrations (pp. 258 and 318), what should have read the "Society for the Preservation of New England Antiquities," is incorrectly given.

These points aside, *Fair Clear and Terrible* is a fascinating and absorbing work which will find favor with all those interested in Maine's religious heritage.

Randall H. Bennett
Bethel Historical Society