

Rebecca Kneale Gould, *At Home in Nature: Modern Homesteading and Spiritual Practice in America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 380 pp., \$25.95 (pbk), ISBN: 978-0-5202-4142-8. Review doi: 10.1558/jsrnc.v4i1.93.

Rebecca Kneale Gould's book is more than an excellent ethnography of homesteaders in America. It is also an exploration of how large-scale socio-structural changes in the United States affect the practice of religion. Today's modern homesteaders 'have built their own homes, planted gardens, preserved their food, worked at ways to make a home-based living, and also have often educated their children on the homestead' (p. xvi). They see themselves as part of a 'growing spiritual shift' in America, one that rejects the culture of consumption, looks outside of religious institutions for spiritual fulfillment, and seeks 'to practice a way of living that is in step with the natural world rather than against it' (p. xx).

Gould divides the book into ethnographic and historical sections, Chapters 1–3 and 4–6, respectively. Chapter 1 explores the thought processes that lead individuals to make the conversion to homesteading. Individuals endeavor to make their own food (so they know where it *really* comes from), heat their houses with wood cut on-site, struggle to keep vegetable gardens that provide enough food, and strive overall for a life of self-sufficiency. It is important to note that while homesteaders may construct 'the meaning of what is *natural* in a variety of ways', they generally express an overall 'commitment to *nature*' as well as 'to on-the-ground environmental ethics, do-it-yourself pragmatics, and an improvisational, nature-based spiritual practice' (p. 23). Gould rightly notes that sentiments expressed by homesteaders often resemble those of the Christian Right in America (p. 16). These groups may disagree about religious fundamentals, environmental issues, and what constitutes patriotism, but they both tend to criticize consumerism, industrialism, and rampant individualism, while trusting the family as an important authority structure.

Chapter 2 explores some of the inspiration behind new homesteaders. Many are inspired by Henry David Thoreau, who provided 'philosophical foundations and, hence, legitimizing authority' to those thinking about becoming homesteaders (p. 41). In order to understand the legacy of Thoreau and others, Gould provides several vignettes of homesteaders and their processes of self-construction and meaning making. In Chapter 3, Gould explores the importance of 'ritualization'. Gould tells the story of a part-time professor who grades papers 'by the flickering light of a kerosene lamp' or other individuals who ski out to their car in the early morning (pp. 64, 65). These actions, this wrestling with nature, become ritualized and their significance lies in how they help individuals straddle the two worlds that they often belong to: the urban and the rural. Many are conscious of their rituals but, as Gould states, 'the experience of nature that occurs in and through symbolic and ritualized activity remains authentic and, for many, transformational' (p. 69). The chapter also provides a fascinating discussion of the importance of 'rituals of food' (pp. 74–86). As Gould accurately notes, a decision to become a homesteader is a decision about food (deciding the *disciplines* around eating, deciding *what* to eat, and *where* to get the food, etc.). The basic mindset is that 'nature should set the menu for the human guests and not the other way around' (p. 80).

The second half of the book places homesteading in historical perspective, mainly through the introduction of several important homesteaders who have gained prominence in the United States. Chapters 4 and 5 explore the lives of naturalists John

Burroughs (1837–1921) and Scott Nearing (1883–1983). Gould places Burroughs and Nearing in the context of changes taking place in early twentieth-century America, stating that during the so-called Gilded Age and the Progressive Era, ‘nature became, for the first time in American history, more than a physical context for home and farm’ (p. 141). As interest in nature was revived, it became a place to be savored and experienced.

Chapter 6 examines other, lesser-known individuals who also advocated homesteading as a solution to the trials of modernity: Bolton Hall (1854–1938), the founder of the Free Acres Association in New Jersey, and Ralph Borsodi (1886–1977). According to Gould, many of these individuals were post-Christian in their religious outlook. They were often spiritually motivated but ultimately anti-institutional in their religiosity (p. 178). This chapter also attempts to make clear that the contemporary homesteading movement has much in common with and borrows from ‘the whole range of homesteading styles and cultural criticisms that we have seen from John Burroughs to Wendell Berry’ (p. 194). Contemporary homesteaders, as Gould states, have ‘come of age’; they tend not to write ambitious tracts preaching the virtues of homesteading, focusing instead on individual practice (p. 195).

Chapter 7 explores the ambivalence that some individuals feel about their homesteading practices. Gould deals in this chapter with issues of gender, class, nature, and anti-religious sentiments. While noting that the issue of homesteading and gender ‘could be a book of its own’, she points out that many women who have embraced second-wave feminism—which was very much concerned with overturning de facto inequalities in the home—find it difficult consciously to go back to a life of domesticity. Most homesteaders acknowledge that the lifestyle may depend ‘on shared labor wherein both men and women are responsible for particular circumscribed aspects of homestead living’ (p. 204). The discussion of class is similarly interesting. Gould points out that homesteading is often a path chosen by individuals from affluent social classes. As she put it, by choosing to become a homesteader, ‘meaning is made by giving up a life of material comfort’ and embracing more limited circumstances (p. 218). Such a choice indeed presupposes both an economic perspective as well as a cultural awareness. As Gould notes, homesteading entertains a view of nature as ‘a source of authority’ that comes ‘out of a particular history of negotiation between religion and science in the twentieth century’ (p. 219).

Gould’s analysis is not all focused on the virtues of homesteading. One important question she addresses toward the end of the book is whether the spiritual benefits of homesteading ‘keep some homesteaders from working for social change and even lull them into a kind of complacency, one that privileges their own self-fulfillment over broad social concerns’ (p. 230). Gould’s rich and intimate portrait of homesteading practices and the individuals involved provides a glimpse into a world that is foreign to most and peculiar to many. It is a worldview characterized by a radical rejection of ‘utilitarian dominance over nature in the name of human progress’ (p. 47) followed by an acceptance of the natural world as ‘an enduring source of authority, solace and meaning’ (p. 136). Gould’s book, with its seamless mixture of ethnography and history, should be required reading for those interested in religious change and contemporary American religiosity, as well as in the intersection of religion, nature, and culture.

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