

Example of book review on a shopkeeper's millennium: society and revivals in roch...

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(Book Review)

Rochester, New York is renowned for being the hub for the religious revival that thrived in the early 19th century in the United States of America and changed the society greatly. Due to the mentioned historical reinforcement and stimulation, the United States of America turned out to be the world's most militantly Protestant country. It also had a great effect on a majority of other antebellum reform movements in the North. In particular, it affected the movements that were meant for the slavery abolition and temperance. Nevertheless, even though a lot of historians have talked about its insightful and widespread consequences, very little is known regarding the causes of the said revolution. In *A Shopkeeper's Millennium*, Johnson has not only explored the interrelation between the vital changes in the economy, society, politics and religious beliefs of America but he has also been successful in presenting a reminiscent image of a fast growing front line urban area.

This is the reason why almost three decades after its earliest publication, *A Shopkeeper's Millennium* is considered a landmark work. Paul E. Johnson has also investigated various reasons for success of the revival in Rochester and has discovered imperative links between its ethical accounting and industrial innovations. He has also concentrated on the chaotic evangelization of the city at the hands of Charles Grandison Finney. He has explained the causes of revival mentioning the rootlessness and agitation of Americans as the most important ones. Johnson has presented the outcome of Finney's

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preaching that mostly impacted the affluent members of the city including traders, professionals etc. He has shown that Finney's converts did not practice individualism alone but made their employers also practice the same. The book also depicts the isolation of the converts from the working men and how they ended the conventional patriarchal association between the master and slave. The kind of Christianity that they adopted was against the alcoholic use, theatrical entertainments and other such pleasures. The evangelic revolution in Rochester laid the sole responsibility of morality on the shoulders of the individual. Johnson has excellently described how evangelicalism in the city served in the middle-class legitimization. It won't be incorrect to state that Johnson has conducted an extensive and exhaustive research to write a fluent assessment. It can be said that Johnson has become one of the very few debutants whose exceptional work has given them a great position in the scholarly world.

There are a lot of historians, anthropologists and sociologists who have discussed the revivals of Charles Finney and their success. However, Johnson has described those revolutionary events as " a means of building order and a sense of common purpose among sovereign, footloose and money-hungry individualist" (Johnson 9). In " A Shopkeeper's Millennium", Johnson has attributed the revivals' success to the interruption of social relationships. He has described how the social association displaced as a consequence of the artisanal structure and the industrial capitalism in Rochester. He praises Finney's all-encompassing revivals that encouraged people to facilitate total communal makeover. The question that instantaneously crossed their minds after conversion was " Lord, what wilt thou have me do?" For many, the

answer was simple — unite with other Christians and convert the world” (Johnson 113).

Johnson has examined a plethora of various important primary resources. He then concludes that Rochester is a strong representation of the other contemporary New England and Western metropolitan cities. One of the most important features of this groundbreaking work is that Johnson has given the reader a relevant background of Rochester life before 1820s. He has done so in a thematic and chronological manner by giving account of the population expansion and the ultimate changes in the economic and social conditions. It is exceedingly important to state that Johnson has investigated and presented historical facts in a very impressive manner. He has given his readers a joyful read. This is because Johnson has not only provided a comprehensive and personal version of the Rochester society but also presented a firm historical basis that helps reader examine the period without doing much effort. The other profound feature of the book is that it gives an account of the times both before and after Finney’s revivals. It won’t be incorrect to state that the author has presented a convincing case of Rochester by recreating the city’s life in those times. He has made it more realistic by presenting a cautious scrutiny of records related to church and community such as directories, lists of tax and tariffs, census programs, materials related to genealogy, articles, diaries etc.

However, one drawback of the work is that Johnson lacks the required depth and breadth for making a concrete ending about the reasons and outcomes of the Second Great Awakening. Another thing that is lacking in the work is the study regarding other evangelic towns of the 19th century. Such studies

could have helped Johnson to pencil in some long-lasting sociological conclusions. In addition, Johnson has used information related to economic and political conditions of the affected workmen. However, the lack of personal conversion accounts can be felt by the intimate readers. It can thus be said that Johnson has failed to give personal reflections of the affected people which could have led to a far better understanding of the revival's impact on Rochester inhabitants. Another drawback of the book is that Johnson has failed to give accounts of the contributions of Rochester women. He himself admits this mistake with an open heart. He confesses that he did not give much consideration to the role of Rochester women in his book and failed to evaluate their contribution to the city of Rochester. It can be concluded that despite the fact that Johnson studied the sources broadly and exhaustively; he did give much emphasis to the whites and affluent Rochester citizens. He should have widened his research to recognize the efforts of Rochester women for the social transformation in their hometown. Rochester was the most evangelized city in the United States of America at the time of Finney's revivals. This made it much easier for Johnson to study it as the city experienced significant changes in such a short time span. However, Johnson's book has narrowed the study by emphasizing on Rochester and ignoring the rest of the evangelized cities in USA. The book only offers comprehensive account of Rochester life. However, it is important to mention here that the sociological phenomenon and changes of those times were not only confined to Rochester.

Work Cited

Johnson, Paul E. *A Shopkeeper's Millennium: Society and Revivals in Rochester, New York, 1815-1837*. New York: Hill and Wang, 1978. Print.