

## BOOK REVIEW

**Enchanted Ground: The Spirit Room of Jonathan Koons** by Sharon Hatfield. Swallow Press, 2018. 342+16 pp. \$23.16 (hardcover). ISBN: 978-0804012089.

### REVIEWED BY TOM RUFFLES

[tom.ruffles@gmail.com](mailto:tom.ruffles@gmail.com)

<https://doi.org/10.31275/2020/1791>

Creative Commons License CC-BY-NC

The mediumship of Jonathan Koons is much less well-known than that of the Fox sisters, though during the 1850s his Spirit Room at Athens, Ohio, became a desirable destination for Spiritualists keen to seek contact with the spirit world. There they experienced a wide variety of phenomena that would shortly become staples of the movement. Local resident and nonfiction author Sharon Hatfield has made a painstaking examination of Koons's life and career based on the available evidence, setting it in the context of the developing religion of Spiritualism.

Koons was born in Pennsylvania in 1811. He moved to Mount Nebo—actually a large hill in Athens County, southeastern Ohio, in the foothills of the Appalachians—in 1835, where he farmed and became patriarch to a sizeable family. In his youth he had had a mystical experience involving a 'visit to the realm of light' which led him to believe he had met an angel. Originally Presbyterian, he abandoned the religion as he found its Calvinism uncongenial, becoming as he put it an 'infidel.' He lacked a formal education but read widely.

In early 1852 he encountered reports of the Fox sisters' mediumship and decided to investigate the subject. He attended séances and, initially skeptical, was told he himself had a gift. Trying it, he found a new religious faith. He also discovered that other members of his family, particularly his eldest son Nahum, had mediumistic abilities. After a while, they were told by Spirit to build a dedicated room to hold about 20–25 people, indicating that séances were to include more than his immediate friends and family. Koons duly built a log cabin

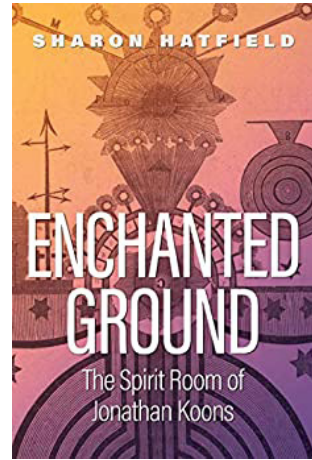
on the farm to the given specifications and furnished it, including with musical instruments, as instructed. The stage was then set for public séances.

These soon attracted the attention of both truth seekers and the curious from a widening geographical area. It was an isolated spot and not easy to reach, despite which many made the journey; the book's title comes from the account of a visitor in 1855 who described traveling 'towards the enchanted ground.' Koons did not charge admission, and while those who stayed were expected to pay something toward bed and board, this generated very little income, and it seems likely that the family subsidized the operation of the Spirit Room.

Séances were conducted in total darkness and were lively. Koons played his fiddle, and soon there would be an accompaniment from a spirit band that moved around the crowded room playing loudly. A trumpet allowed spirits to speak directly to the sitters. Spirit hands, feeling cold to the touch, appeared, either self-illuminating or illuminated by sheets of phosphorous-covered paper. Lengthy messages, written very quickly, were conveyed to sitters.

As a result, Koons gained a prominent and generally respected position in the movement, with his activities widely reported in the Spiritualist press, though he had detractors as well as enthusiastic champions. He was a prolifically polemical writer, further raising his profile. The Spirit Room was in existence for a relatively short period and had closed by November 1855, though the family continued to hold séances elsewhere for a time. In 1858 Koons and his family moved to Illinois, where he died in 1893.

In foregrounding Koons's career in Spiritualism, Hatfield has provided a fascinating snapshot of the movement in its infancy. She does not reach a conclusion on his claim of contact with the spirit world, focusing instead on ritual and belief and the transformative effect of Koons's séances, but the issue of fraud always hovers in the background despite the many testimonies from eyewitnesses who



claimed fraud had been precluded by the physical difficulties such a confined space presented.

Other attendees were less impressed, noting Koons's resistance to the imposition of thorough controls and the darkness within which the family operated. It was not unusual for mediums producing seemingly impeccable phenomena to be unmasked as cheats, and Koons's reputation was damaged by an event in Cleveland in 1856: The family was holding a séance at the home of the editor of the *Spiritual Universe* when a suddenly struck match showed his daughter Quintilla on her feet.

Despite his critics' negative views, Hatfield, following Brandon Hodge's (2015) similar conclusion, demonstrates that Koons was a significant force in early Spiritualism rather than the peripheral figure he had previously been considered. This is a welcome corrective because, notwithstanding his inclusion in Emma Hardinge Britten's *Modern American Spiritualism*, for someone who played a seminal role in formulating the repertoire of the dark séance and was an influence on later mediums such as the Davenport brothers, he has been largely neglected in more recent scholarship. Even Bret E. Carroll's *Spiritualism in Antebellum America*, a detailed examination of the period during which the Spirit Room flourished, devotes only two pages to Koons.

To some extent this neglect may have been because commentators shared Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's prejudice when he dismissed Koons as "a case of true physical mediumship of a crude quality, as might be expected where a rude uncultured farmer was the physical centre of it" (1926). Hatfield has redressed the balance with this valuable addition to the literature, and she amply justifies her claim, referring to the Spiritualist movement, that Koons was "one of its most charismatic figures—a backwoods seer whose legacy would rival even that of the famous Fox sisters for a place in its history."

## REFERENCES

- Britten, E. H. (1870). *Modern American Spiritualism: A twenty years' record of the communion between Earth and the world of spirits*. Self-published.
- Carroll, B. E. (1997). *Spiritualism in antebellum America*. Indiana University Press.
- Conan Doyle, A. (1926). *The history of spiritualism*. Cassell & Co.
- Hodge, B. (2015). Ghosts in the machines. 'For want of a nail.' *Paranormal Review*, 75, 34–35; 76, 36–37.