

Jonestown

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Rebecca Moore. *The Jonestown Letters: Correspondence of the Moore Family 1970–1985*. Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen P, 1986. ix + 398 pp. \$69.95.

David Chidester. *Salvation and Suicide: An Interpretation of Jim Jones, the Peoples Temple, and Jonestown*. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1988. ix + 190 pp. \$18.95.

Michael Meiers. *Was Jonestown A CIA Medical Experiment?* Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen P, 1988. ix + 575 pp. \$39.95.

Rebecca Moore. *In Defense of Peoples Temple*. Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen P, 1988. 189 pp. No price indicated.

Rebecca Moore and Fielding McGehee III, eds. *New Religious Movements, Mass Suicide, and Peoples Temple*. Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen P, 1989. 251 pp. \$39.95.

MORE THAN THIRTY BOOKS have been published about the Jonestown events of fifteen years ago. Some take the position that the movement and the mass suicide of its members can best be understood by focusing on the personality of Jim Jones, the founder and leader of the Peoples Reform Movement and later Peoples Temple. James Reston, Jr.'s *Our Father Who Art In Hell* (NY: Times Books, 1981) and *Raven* by Tim Reiterman (NY: E.P. Dutton, 1982) are included in this category. Others interpret the movement as growing out of the social fabric of the times and emphasize the social environment in San Francisco and later as a closed society in Guyana as the keys to understanding the movement's direction and end. Judith Mary Weightman's *Making Sense of the Jonestown Suicides: A Sociological History of Peoples Temple* (NY: Edwin Mellen Press, 1983) was an early effort in that direction. A more social-psychological approach was contained in John Hall's *Gone from the Promised Land: Jonestown in American Cultural History* (New Brunswick, NY: Transaction Books, 1987) in that the processes of interaction among members, Jim Jones and outsiders were the focus. Other ways to understand the movement are included in the five books under discussion here. The first three are personal works produced by remaining family members who had three close relatives die at Jonestown. The fourth raises the question of CIA involvement in Jonestown, and the fifth considers Jonestown from a religious viewpoint.

The Moore family consisted of parents John and Barbara, daughters Rebecca, Carolyn and Ann, and Carolyn's four year old son, Kimo. Carolyn and later Ann joined Jim Jones's Peoples Reform Movement in San Francisco in the late 1960's and early 1970's respectively and accompanied the group to Guyana. They were both members of Jones's inner circle. Ann was a nurse and attended him through the last months of his life when he was physically ill at times. She may have been the last to die on the night of the mass suicides. Carolyn was Jim Jones's lover and a loyal follower for a decade. *The Jonestown Letters* is more accurately the history of the Moore family from the late 1960's through November 1978, and somewhat beyond. The largest number of reproduced letters are from the two movement members, Carolyn and Ann, to either their sister or their parents. While the two young women do not seem to be typical members, one of the author's goals is to counteract the tendency to dehumanize the followers of Jim Jones by forcing them into explanatory categories. In this, the book is a poignant success. The mundane concerns of the family members in the letters are made eerily touching by knowledge of the impending doom of two of the correspondents.

In Defense of Peoples Temple was written by the editor of *The Jonestown Letters*. It is a history of the Peoples Temple from the San Francisco period, through the events in Guyana, with some follow-up material on how the government handled the disaster and how survivors have coped with the events. While it is less personal than the book organized around family letters, the Moore family remains the focus. Some of the letters presented in the previous book, or excerpts from them, are reprinted in this volume. While little is added to our knowledge of Jonestown in this book, it is an informative, if painful description of how a family copes when confronted with the loss of two young, active adults amidst confusing, journalistically exaggerated and frustrating efforts to simply learn what happened to their daughters and siblings. The Moore family members have been unusual in their doggedness. By probing, demanding, and cajoling governmental agencies and writing about the experience one can only hope that a catharsis of sorts has been reached by them.

New Religious Movements, Mass Suicide, and Peoples Temple, edited by Rebecca Moore and her husband, Fielding McGehee III, is a collection of thirteen articles published ten years after the mass suicides at Jonestown. Some of the contributors will be familiar to utopian scholars. John Hall, author of several articles and a book on Jonestown, Robert Fogarty and Tom Robbins place Jonestown in historical perspective and discuss its logical antecedents. Three other articles use the general concerns of the sociology of religion to link the organization to larger societal structures. The remaining seven articles are more diverse, but several discuss the anti-cult movement and more philosophical issues concerning myth and the nature of good and evil. Most of the papers were commissioned for this volume, although several are reworked from earlier publications. Collectively, the writings represent what Robbins has called the "second wave" of literature on

Jonestown (115). Following the mass suicides, most scholars were unwilling to draw conclusions without extensive study, and this left the door open for a first wave of pop psychology, anti-cult moralism and sensational journalism. The second wave is represented by efforts which have profited by greater weighing and consideration of the event some ten years after. This volume constitutes the distilled and fermented thinking of scholars who have spent much of a decade trying to understand the Jonestown phenomenon.

The contention that the Central Intelligence Agency was somehow involved with Jonestown emerged soon after the mass suicides occurred. The usual reasoning has been that the CIA would be interested in brainwashing, and Jonestown provided a natural laboratory for experimentation in the isolation of Guyana. Meiers's book *Was Jonestown A CIA Medical Experiment?* differs from other conspiracy theories at least in its specificity. He speculates that mind control drugs were administered to members according to standard experimental methodology. Residents were divided into three groups, whether randomly or not is not discussed. Group A received one chemical, Group B a second drug of interest, and Group C—the control group—received no drugs. The drugs, Meiers thinks, were administered once per week by Jones on Sunday evenings when he ritualistically gave each member one cookie from three jars at his side. Apparently Jones knew which was which, making the experiment a blind, rather than double-blind, design. The alleged dependent variable, one of the most macabre in experimental history, was whether on the final white night of suicides, the subject voluntarily took poison when told, or had to be forcibly injected.

According to Meiers, *Was Jonestown A CIA Medical Experiment?* is the product of six years of investigation. He has sifted through a considerable amount of material, and his conclusion is unequivocally that the experimental scenario outlined above occurred and was the reason for the mass suicides. The events he interprets are ambiguous, evidence is indirect, and alternative explanations are available for every interpretation. For example, after the suicides, Meiers writes that in order to tabulate the dependent variable (suicide versus murder), Jonestown guards identified the dead and then "As the cause of death was noted on the medical records of each Test Person, the corpses were dragged to one side and placed in neat, orderly piles" (413). Other investigators have remarked on the groupings of the dead being determined by family membership, and it is not clear why tabulation for experimental purposes would require physically moving the bodies anyway. The assertion is made that Jones was known by the code name Raven, and that the CIA often uses bird names to identify operatives. As evidence, he cites "Three Days of the *Condor*," "The *Falcon* and the Snowman" and "The *Scarecrow* and Mrs. King." These names are creations of novelists or scriptwriters rather than the CIA, however; and the name scarecrow would seem to be more of an anti-bird name.

The evidence for CIA involvement in the manner claimed by Meiers is not compelling, but neither does anything he writes totally dispel the possibility. Perhaps the greatest value of this book is to remind officials of

government agencies which have been involved in shady activities in the past that someone is always out there willing to devote years to present material in the worst case possible.

David Chidester's *Salvation and Suicide* is less than a complete history or description of the organization that was Jonestown. Instead, he presumes that readers have some familiarity with the events and concentrates on interpretations. The focus is on theology and Chidester contends that there is a coherent religious ideology in Jim Jones's thinking. The interpretation goes beyond Jones and his followers, however, and includes societal reaction to the movement. He argues that three types of distancing from the events, especially the mass suicides, have occurred. First, we have dehumanized the followers, made them brainwashed, controlled individuals so that we would not have to confront the recognition that such a rational decision could be made by human beings. Second, a political distancing occurred by the United States government so that the movement would not be the basis for an analysis for what is wrong with this society. Third, religious distancing placed the Peoples Temple outside the Christian tradition so that Christianity would not come under attack. An attempt to correct this third distancing is the main focus of the book, though the other two are not neglected. Chidester reconstructs the religious worldview of Jones, provides a phenomenological interpretation of the movement's orientation in space and time, and finally suggests that the final white night was an expression of that worldview. The book is well written, follows conventional academic standards, and is professionally edited and presented.

A definitive book on Jonestown still has not been written, and perhaps there will always be multiple explanations as dependent for meaningfulness upon the observer as upon the events themselves. The enormity of what happened has been sufficient to absorb a diversity of aims and approaches, as the five books considered here aptly demonstrate.