

RICHARD MCNEMAR: FRONTIER HERETIC AND SHAKER APOSTLE. By Christian Goodwillie. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2023. Xvii + 518 pages.

REVIEWED BY ROBERT D. CORNWALL¹

At the turn of the nineteenth century, revivals broke out on what was then the Western Frontier, places like Kentucky and Ohio. The revivalists included Baptists, Methodists, and Presbyterians. Among the latter were New Light Presbyterians, who rebelled against what they believed were narrow and constrictive doctrinal confessions. The Old Light Presbyterians tended to look askance at the methods of the revivalists as well. With these ecclesial divisions emerging on the frontier, one of the best-known of the Kentucky Revivals took place at Cane Ridge in 1801. The church where the revival took place at Cane Ridge was led by a New Light Presbyterian named Barton W. Stone, whom members of the Stone-Campbell Movement look to as a founder. Stone wasn't alone in his efforts to bring revival to Kentucky and Ohio. Among the others with whom he partnered was Richard McNemar, who would end up becoming a leader among the Shakers in that region. While the name Richard McNemar might ring a bell for Stone-Campbell people, the role he played in the formative events of the Stone portion of the

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movement— as one of the signers of “The Last Will and Testament of the Springfield Presbytery” —may be less well known.

The most recent biography of Barton Stone was written by D. Newell Williams under the title *Barton Stone: A Spiritual Biography* (St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 2000). Williams acknowledges McNemar’s important role in the Kentucky Revivals and his partnership with Barton Stone, who shared many of his theological beliefs and concerns. Nevertheless, the two men eventually took very different routes. While Williams follows the trajectory laid down by Stone, one might be interested in knowing more about McNemar’s life, beliefs, and where they led after the demise of the Springfield Presbytery on June 28, 1804. With that in mind, a major biography of McNemar appeared in 2023. Authored by Christian Goodwillie, it is titled *Richard McNemar: Frontier Heretic and Shaker Apostle*. The focus of Goodwillie’s massive biography is McNemar’s involvement with the Shakers, also known as the United Society of Believers in Christ’s Second Appearing, which was centered around the teachings of Mother Ann Lee. It was known for, among other things, its embrace of celibacy.

The author of this biography, Christian Goodwillie, is the Director and Curator of Special Collections at the Burke Library of Hamilton College in Clinton, New York. He was previously the Curator of Collections at Hancock Shaker Village in Massachusetts. He has focused his scholarly attention on the Shakers, as well as other intentional communities. Therefore, he offers the reader an in-depth look at one of the leading figures in the region of Ohio, Kentucky, and Indiana, that being McNemar.

For Stone-Campbell readers, the most relevant section focuses on McNemar’s involvement with Barton Stone and other New Light Presbyterians on the western frontier at the turn of the nineteenth century (Chapters 2-7). He provides the reader with a helpful look at the theological views held by McNemar and others like him, which complement what Williams did in his biography of Barton Stone. In many ways, McNemar was the instigator of much of the ferment that led to the creation of the Springfield Presbytery and its demise. It was his heresy trial that brought several figures together to form the presbytery, and he, not Stone, wrote the “Last Will and Testament of the Springfield Presbytery,” which the Stone-Campbell Movement members view as a foundational document. The goal of the signers of that document was for them to blend into the church at large by rejecting the creeds and confessions they had inherited from the Presbyterian Church, along with its ecclesial forms. This document was signed by six ministers, including McNemar and Stone. With the signing

of the document, the participants in the Presbytery released themselves from the control of the Presbyterian Church. But that was only the beginning of the larger story, because the six participants in this effort ultimately went off in several directions.

Among the five clergy and one elder (David Purviance) who formed and then disbanded the presbytery, two returned to the Presbyterian Church, two went on to form what came to be known as the Christian Churches (Barton Stone and David Purviance), and two, including Richard McNemar, became Shakers. In his biography of McNemar, Christian Goodwillie tells us how McNemar became attracted to the message of the Shakers, a message that was shared with all of the participants, including Stone, who strongly rejected their message. As for McNemar, who is the focus of this biography, he not only became a Shaker, but he became a leader in the movement, as well as its defender, and as the subtitle puts it, the apostle of the Shakers. Not only did he become a Shaker, but his wife, who had already produced seven children, along with most of his children, embraced the movement. The one who did join, his son Richard McNemar Jr., became a follower of Emmanuel Swedenborg. We discover, as we move through the biography, McNemar's intellectual gifts, as well as signs of mental illness. He was especially known for his defense of the Shakers from attacks from opponents of the movement, namely that it was communal and practiced celibacy, along with their apocalyptic views centered on the belief that Ann Lee was in fact the second coming of Christ on earth.

For members of the Stone-Campbell Movement, as noted above, Chapters Two through Seven will be of the greatest interest because they feature McNemar's involvement in the Kentucky revivals and the formation of the Springfield Presbytery. They may be much less familiar with the Shakers, a movement that emphasized the teachings of Mother Ann Lee, who proclaimed herself the fulfillment of the second coming of Christ. The movement was communal, hierarchical, at times charismatic, and ascetic. Goodwillie covers a great deal of ground, helping those, like me, who are less informed about the Shakers, gain a better understanding of the movement and why someone like Richard McNemar, whose theological views were at one point similar to those of Barton Stone, could embrace the message of the Shakers, which Stone strongly rejected. He also reminds us that the frontier was a place of religious ferment that gave birth to the Stone-Campbell Movement, the Mormons, and where Shakers, among others, found a home. While Goodwillie's biography is informative, it could have used some editing to make the narrative more compelling, as we encounter a number of people who seem tangential to McNemar's efforts to defend and support the expansion of the Shakers in the West.