The Cult of Joanna Southcott

Could her eighteenth-century prophecies someday save the world?

Article and Photo by K. J. Parsons

Culver Pictures

During an Easter service in 1792, a middle-aged British woman named Joanna Southcott announced that she was God's new representative on Earth.

The congregation roared in laughter — but ultimately, some began to believe. Joanna Southcott, who received premonitions on a fairly regular basis throughout her life, eventually inspired a still-thriving cult that centers around the contents of a darkened Victorian temple in Bedford, England.

Joanna Southcott was born in April 1750, the fourth daughter of pious tenant farmers William and Hannah Southcott. Throughout her childhood she was a happy-go-lucky girl who liked nothing better than playing with friends and reading the Bible.

When she reached adulthood, she became an upholsterer's assistant in Exeter. She spent much of her spare time in Exeter Cathedral, deep in devotional study. There she became entranced by the Wesleyan religious movement, whose highly charged interpretation of the Bible was sweeping England.

As she entered her forties, Southcott experienced nightly visions and heard disembodied voices — messages, she claimed, from God. Those messages were always preceded by numerous raps on her bedroom wall. Sometimes she would wake in the early hours to write down prophecies that the deity had directed to her.

"Joanna Southcott," she heard, "the Lord God is awakening out of his sleep, and will terribly shake the Earth. There shall be wars and rumors of wars. Nation shall rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom. There shall be famines, and pestilences, and earthquakes. The sign of the Son of Man shall appear in heaven, and he shall come in the clouds with power and great glory. Watch therefore, for ye know not what hour your Lord doth come."

One night, the 42-year-old woman allegedly received a spiritual announcement that revealed how she had been "sent by God to Exeter" to become "the

lamb's wife." She was informed that it was her duty to remain pure and untouched by any mortal, and so she shunned relationships with men and started referring to herself as the "temple of Shiloh."

When Southcott made her Easter announcement at the Wesleyan church, the congregation roared hysterically. Many chanted such things as "shame" and "blasphemy." In response, Southcott fell, in fever and fits, on the floor. As if possessed by demonic forces, she was left struggling with the powers of darkness for days afterward.

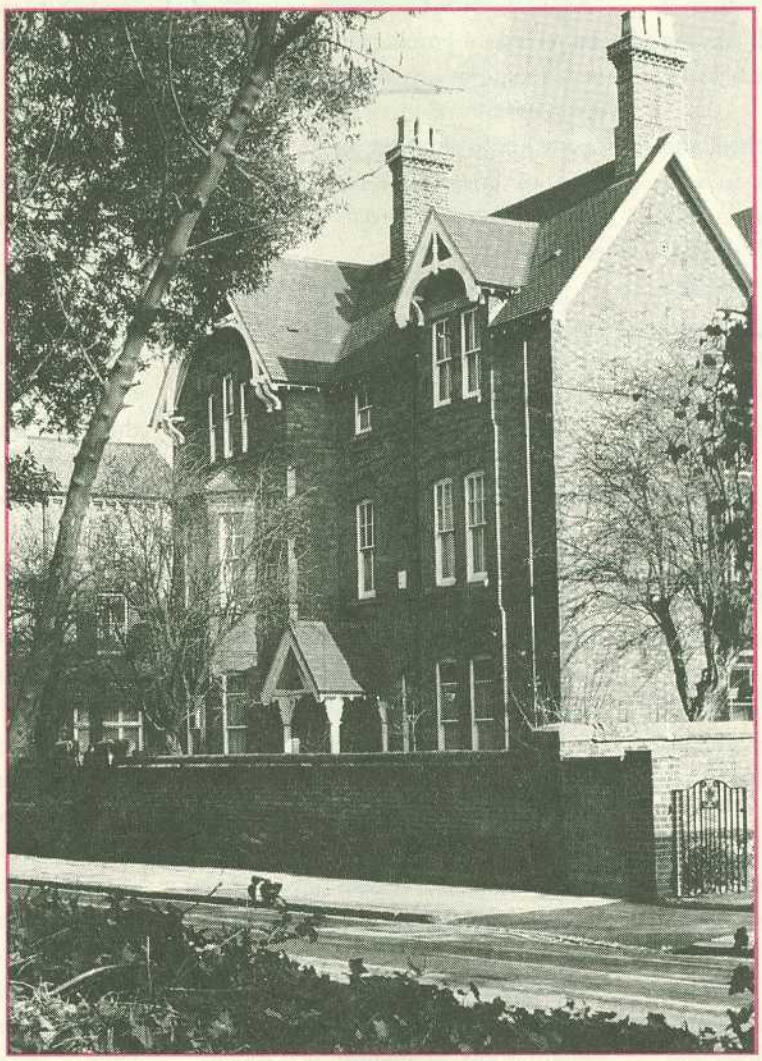
Many at the church were sympathetic, and she gradually built a small but fervent following.

She moved to Bristol in 1798, where she began working on the first of many books and pamphlets. A slim volume of her initial predictions was published in 1801. The work contained a challenge to any 12 ministers to test her powers of prognostication.

The source of her revelations, which she called "The Spirit of Truth," informed her that over the next 22 years she would receive divine guidance — and instructed her to hire two secretaries to take down her dictations. The Spirit told Southcott to seal the dictations in a box, which was to be stored for safekeeping in Exeter's Guild Hall.

On January 1, 1802, three Church of England representatives and four other witnesses attended what was called the "First Trial" of Southcott's predictions. After breaking the seals on the stored documents, the seven judges said the information could only have been obtained by paranormal means. Apparently, about a fourth of the documents contained personal information about the judges themselves.

The papers were put back into storage for a "Second Trial" that was to take place in London.



Some believe that Joanna Southcott's most powerful predictions are still locked inside this Victorian mansion, the headquarters of the Panacea Society in Bedford, England. (Photo by K. J. Parsons)

Southcott's rise over the following months was astonishing. Her inspired disciples worldwide, known as Southcottians, showered her with money and expensive gifts. In a short time, the farmer's daughter had become a messianic figure.

A second trial of her writings took place at the start of 1803. One of her declarations was that the Bishop of Exeter, who was in good health at the time of her prediction, would die. She had even foretold the date of his demise.

For months after, England rang with the results of Southcott's many prophecies, and her long-term predictions were put into a great box. When it was full, it weighed approximately 156 pounds. The lid was secured with copper nails and the whole effort was tightly bound. Then the binding cords were sealed with seven wax seals and the box was put into the safekeeping of friends.

Since then, it has been handed down from generation to generation. Believers say that when the box is finally opened, the prophecies will save the human race from disaster.

Southcottianism spread. Chapels devoted to Southcott's teachings appeared throughout England. Some critics, however, ridiculed her prophecies. Cartoonists portrayed her as a bulbous old witch who suffered from delusions of grandeur.

In her last published work in 1814, Southcott wrote, "I am now compelled to flee, not only from the face of my enemies, but from friends likewise, to conceal myself in a place of safety, where I am not known by any person; and my name I am obliged to conceal, to preserve my life from malicious and inveterate enemies, who threatened to set the house on fire where I lived, and to take my life if they by any means could get me in their power."

She hid in a cottage in Gloucestershire, where she had secretly escaped from time to time since 1804.

In 1813, Southcott made an astounding announcement. Her voice had told her that even though she was well past

menopause, she would bear a son — the second Messiah, as promised in the Bible.

"In 10 years from the fourth of the century the Messiah will come," she said. She announced that his name would be Shiloh. He would not be the reincarnation of Jesus, but rather, a second messiah. The world, having rejected the first coming, was to be given a second chance.

As her due date approached, she invited many eminent people to send physicians to verify her miraculous pregnancy. Seventeen of the 21 doctors who examined her declared that the 64-year-old woman was pregnant, and the baby was due on November 18. Crowds of believers from around the world gathered outside Southcott's house to wait.

In September, a special crib was ordered by a leading furniture company, at the cost of £1,400 — a huge sum in those days. The crib's canopy was decorated with stars and a small globe at each corner. In the center of the design, a gold dove was depicted with the olive branch of peace. The curtains of the crib were sky-blue with gold fringe.

On the front and sides, the words "Welcome the heavenly stranger" were painted in gold. The back bore a crown of gold with the word "Shiloh" in Hebrew. Inside its frame of satinwood were a real down mattress and pillows. Its sheets and pillowcases were of the highest quality, trimmed with lace, with a white satin quilt embroidered with the tree of life and figures of the millennium.

But the big day came and went without incident. On November 19, she told her physician that she believed she was dying, and she gave him written instructions to open her body four days after her death. Some say this was to release a spiritual child into the world.

Joanna Southcott died on December 27, 1814. An autopsy revealed a swollen condition of the womb sometimes known as a phantom- or pseudo-pregnancy.

Despite their disappointment, Southcottians continued to pursue their beliefs for another century.

Before Southcott died, she left an "Ark of the New Covenant" — another sealed box of prophecies that she said would someday save the world. She had given strict instructions that it was to be opened only after her death, during a time of grave national danger — "beyond any of the trials we have yet endured."

"Crime and banditry, distress of nations, and perplexity will continue to increase until the bishops or their representatives open Joanna Southcott's box of sealed writings," she said.

The Spiritual Ark was placed with a secret custodian for safekeeping.

False Prophecies

Over the years, a number of false boxes have appeared. They may have been deceptions perpetrated by high-ranking members of the Church of England, to dampen public interest in her writings.

In 1925 a small, coffin-shaped case publicized as "Joanna's box" was opened at Hammersmith. It contained only a Bible and a lock of hair. That same year another disappointing box was opened in Bournemouth.

Another pathetic-looking box, weighing just 11 pounds, was scheduled to be forced open in 1927 at Westminster's Church House. Famed investigator Harry Price was booked to do the honors. But after x-raying the casket in his lab beforehand, Price knew it held only mundane, everyday objects of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, completely unconnected with the prophetess or her teachings.

Still, the job had to be done, and in the presence of just one church official, the Bishop of Grantham, he went along with the charade — in front of an eager but ultimately disappointed audience.

The Blue Room

One branch of Southcottianism called the Panacea Society has long been headquartered in Bedford, England. Situated only yards from the Castle Mound, the side windowpanes of their three-story Victorian mansion have all been painted blue to obscure sunlight.

A handyman who used to work at the house once said the painted windows might have something to do with a "coffin" stored in one of the rooms. He said that while the door was usually locked, he once caught a rare glimpse inside. He claimed that the coffin was on an altar, surrounded by burning candles. (Rumor has it that the Freemasons also hold a similar box — is this one and the same?)

The group's secretary grants only the most rudimentary interviews. She simply acknowledges that from time to time the group buys space in *The Daily Mail* and *The Daily Telegraph* detailing the circumstances under which "the great box" can be opened.

In their ads they quote what they believe the Bible says about the box:

And the temple of God was opened in heaven … and there was seen in his temple the Ark of His Testament … and round about the Throne were four-and-twenty Elders sitting … and they fall down … and cast their crowns before the Throne (Rev. 11:19, 4:4-10).

Since the time of the first World War, Southcottians worldwide have been urging the bishops to open Southcott's ark of sealed writings. But until the Church of England sends for the box, the Panacea Society is unable to proceed. In the meantime, they say they want to keep its contents and its location a closely guarded secret. ■

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