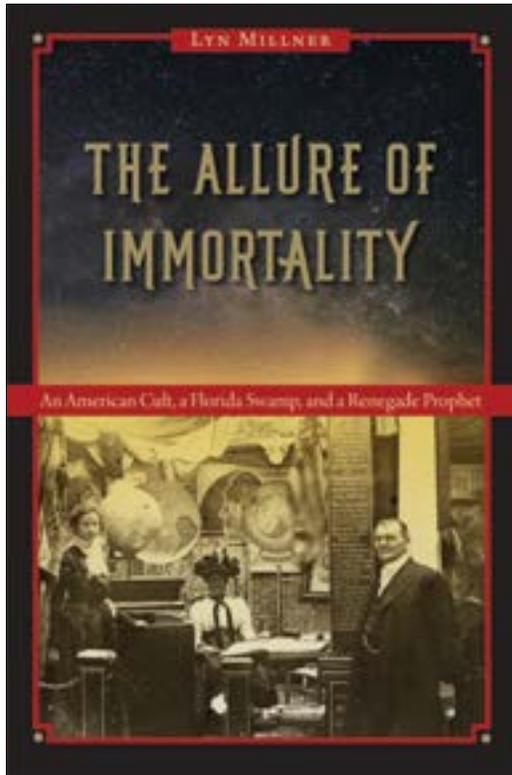


WHAT PEOPLE ARE SAYING



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THE ALLURE OF IMMORTALITY
*An American Cult, a Florida Swamp,
and a Renegade Prophet*
LYN MILLNER

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LYN MILLNER'S radio stories and essays have been broadcast on National Public Radio's *Morning Edition* and *Weekend Edition* and on American Public Media's *Marketplace*. Her print work has appeared in the *New York Times*, *USA Today*, *Oxford American*, *the Hollywood Reporter*, and *Boca Raton* magazine. She teaches journalism at Florida Gulf Coast University. Her website is www.lynmillner.com.

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Q & A with

LYN MILLNER

author of

The Allure of Immortality

An American Cult, a Florida Swamp, and a Renegade Prophet

Where and when did you first hear about Cyrus Teed and the Koreshans?

When you're looking for story ideas, you don't see the obvious ones. Before I lived in Fort Myers, I was driving on I-75 with a friend who's a poet. Coming up on Exit 123, he pointed to a sign for the historic site and said, "Those are the people who thought we lived inside the earth." At the time, my only thought was, "Huh?" We tried to work out how exactly people could think that. What about the stars and the planets and the sun? It was one of those conversations where you're trying to figure something out without any information whatsoever. This was before you could pull up Google on your phone.

It certainly is a fascinating story. Did you think right away that you wanted to write something about it?

Not at all. At the time, I was working on a memoir about my life as an accountant. I didn't come back to the Koreshans for years, after my husband and I moved to Fort Myers and lived just down the street from the settlement. It's funny how something is in the background for a long time and then, one day, it's a huge part of your life. You pass a sign on the interstate. Years later, you're talking to dead people.

Florida is famous (or infamous) for its wacky residents, so much so that #FloridaMan is a running Twitter joke. What separates the story of Cyrus Teed and the Koreshans from your average, run-of-the-mill “weird” story?

They wanted what we all want. To live somewhere beautiful away from pollution and crime, to eat healthy food, to have more time to play, to raise our children the way we see fit, to have answers. To transcend.

How did your training as a journalist prepare you for historical research and writing?

In a word, verification. I was obsessive about getting this story right, and at the same time, I knew I never would. Memories are faulty, so you know going in that notes, journals, and letters have incorrect dates and names, and that’s the least of it. Ask ten people about an event, and you’ll get ten answers, with some overlap if you’re lucky. On top of that, the Koreshans’ writings were distorted by this bizarre view of reality. Teed’s work was nearly impenetrable. If I find myself in hell, my job will be to edit his writing.

The journalism of the time, as you mention in your preface, was not very reliable. Did you, as a modern journalist, want to make up for their failings?

Absolutely. As a journalist, I felt accountable. And the whole time I was writing and revising, I was hyper-aware that this would be the first full-out book about the Koreshans. The apocryphal accounts about them in the 1800s and 1900s were entertaining, but the truth was more complicated and interesting than people assume, and it certainly has more impact. The journalism of the time showed that readers, ostensibly “normal” people, believed ridiculous stories, and that’s one of the book’s themes.

Do you think Teed would have been as successful in converting followers today?

I don’t. But that wouldn’t keep him from trying. He would be a prolific blogger. He would stream his sermons over the internet. He wouldn’t have many followers, but he would have a host of trolls.

Do you think he would see the value in social media?

Actually, he does have a Twitter account. You can follow him [@CyrusTeed](#).

With the scientific knowledge we now have, it can be easy to dismiss some of Koreshanity's beliefs, such as the hollow earth theory. Was there any part of Teed's belief system that you think would resonate with people today?

Resonate isn't quite the word, but there are lasting parallels when it comes to how strong beliefs are. When faced with facts that contradict our beliefs, it's very tempting to ignore them and instead to listen to news we agree with and to surround ourselves with like-minded people. We'd rather be comfortable. For a long time, we were able to ignore evidence that smoking was deadly. Where did that get us? We drained big swaths of the Everglades, yet in a matter of decades, Miami will be under water. I'm positive that some of the things we now believe will seem silly and/or dangerous down the road.

What do you hope readers will take away from this book?

I hope they enjoy it. Perhaps a few people will write me and tell me what they think. I'd like that.

* 1 *

The Illumination

Has my thirst for knowledge consumed my body?

—Cyrus Teed, *The Illumination of Koresh*

Cyrus Teed's family wanted him to be a Baptist preacher like his grandfather, and he might have become one if he had grown up in a different time and place. But he was born in 1839 in New York State, at the end of America's Second Great Awakening.

The country, especially New York, was on fire with revivals. At its height, people gathered by the thousands at camp meetings—"emotional orgies," historian Robert V. Remini called them. "Wild scenes of men and women weeping and tearing their hair, vocally confessing their sins, beating their breasts, rolling on the ground, crawling on all fours like dogs, and barking at trees where they had presumably cornered the devil." The Methodists, Baptists, and Presbyterians were in a war for souls, with the Methodists and Baptists winning.¹

Before the Awakening, most people saw God as removed from their lives, an impersonal authority above them. But in this age, Protestants sought a one-on-one connection. It wasn't unusual during that time for people to talk to God directly, and to believe that he visited them through miracles, dreams, and visions.²

Women easily outnumbered men in religious conversions and dominated the enthusiasm. Revivals, prayer meetings, and church provided excitement in their otherwise restricted lives of sparse intellectual stimulation, stuffy rooms, and uncomfortable clothes. Women formed religious societies and pursued reform projects, and these were considered suitable activities for them. During the Awakening, the woman became the religious foundation for her family.³

Revivals began to level off in the late thirties, but they got a boost when a Baptist minister named William Miller predicted the date of the Second Coming. His ideas spread rapidly. Miller and his evangelists went from town to town, speaking to congregations of all denominations and announcing that Christ would come in 1843 or 1844. The pronouncement energized people and gave reform work a new urgency. He converted fifty thousand people, and keenly interested another one million. The Baptists, especially, were revitalized, and their membership shot up. Their stance, as printed in the *Baptist Register*, was that even if Miller's dates were off, it would be wise to act as if the Second Coming was imminent and to prepare for the big event regardless. Miller spoke in Utica, where Cyrus's family lived, and throngs of people came to see him. Given his influence on Baptists, it's very likely that Cyrus's minister grandfather and his family saw Miller speak and were influenced by his predictions.

When Miller's predicted date passed without incident, he adjusted it, and that date passed, too, and the period after it became known as "the great disappointment." Miller's Adventists split into two major groups: one believed Miller's dates were wrong and that Christ had not yet appeared; the other thought Miller's last date had been correct, and that there was an appearance, but on a heavenly, not an earthly, plane. Today's Seventh-Day Adventists, the largest church in Adventism, grew from this second group.

By the 1840s, evangelists had no one left to convert in western New York, the "burned-over district," where the fires of revivalism and millennialism had blazed strongest but where now, many people had lost their idealism. They wanted, and even needed, new ideas. So as the Awakening wound down, there came a time of "daring social experiments" and "courageous nonconformity," scholar Whitney Cross wrote.⁴

An influx of Europeans during this time brought new thoughts from the Old World, most notably the teachings of Emanuel Swedenborg, which rushed into America in the 1840s. Swedenborg, an eighteenth-century scientist and religious philosopher, blended the notions that a vital force flowed throughout the body, that people could be healed by the laying on of hands, that the brain was connected to consciousness, and that certain areas of the brain were responsible for particular impulses and emotions. He taught that the physical and spiritual worlds were connected through something he called "correspondences."⁵

His theories satisfied both scientists (he began his career as a scientist) and mystics (he claimed to have had a life-changing visit from Christ and to speak with angels frequently). His doctrines show up in the work and letters of many major writers, including Elizabeth Browning, Ralph Waldo Emerson, William Blake, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, and Charles Baudelaire.

Spiritualism, the belief that the living can communicate with the dead, became wildly popular in the nineteenth century, started by two sisters in a Hydesville, New York, farmhouse on April Fool's Eve, 1848. Katie and Margaretta Fox, eleven and fourteen, "discovered" how to communicate with a ghost in their cellar. As an adult, one of the girls claimed that she and her sister had fooled the public by using props and even the joints of their toes to rap out the answers from the ghost. She later recanted this statement, and it's unclear whether the girls were sincere or were pulling a prank. Regardless, the adults believed them from the beginning, and Spiritualism caught fire. Soon, there were public séances in Auburn and Rochester, and before the end of the century, an estimated eight million people in the United States and Europe were Spiritualists, mostly middle and upper class, and the majority of them women.⁶

Spiritualists were early leaders in the women's rights movement, which gathered strength in 1848 thanks to two major events in New York. One was the first-ever women's rights convention, which met in Seneca Falls, where members approved a Declaration of Sentiments stating that women had inalienable rights and that any laws that ran counter to these rights, women had a duty to challenge. The declaration included strong language for men, citing "a long train of injuries and usurpations" and stating that marriage made women "civilly dead." Elizabeth Cady Stanton read the declaration, which she drafted, revisions were made, and it was adopted and signed by one hundred attendees, both women and men. That same year saw another milestone for women's rights: a law in New York was passed to allow a married woman to hold property independently of her husband. The law became a model for other states' laws.⁷



Cyrus Teed was the son of Sarah Tuttle and Jesse Teed; later Cyrus would call attention to being the "root of Jesse" (King David). He was born in Teedville, New York, founded by his father's ancestors, who were well-off—except for Cyrus's particular branch, which was headed by a grandfather who was a "problem child," a relative later wrote. He disliked working for others, overextended himself with credit, and eventually lost everything.⁸

And so, in the economic depression that began with the panic of 1837, Cyrus's family moved to live with his mother's father, the Baptist preacher, near Utica, a boomtown thanks to the building of the Erie Canal, and a Baptist stronghold. Cyrus went to church on Sundays and heard plenty of God's message in his grandfather's sermons, and he studied his Bible. His mother would have made sure of that, as the daughter of a minister in Utica.

Cyrus was a charismatic speaker from the time he was quite young. In

those days, speaking skill was valued as highly as athleticism is today. Going to speeches and sermons was how people educated and entertained themselves—and fed their souls. The ministry was something parents wanted for their sons, especially when those sons were Baptist or Methodist in New York State.



At age eleven, Cyrus dropped out of school and took a job on the Erie Canal, which flowed through the burned-over district. It wasn't unusual then for children to leave school to work to support their families, and his family was large: seventeen Teeds and Tuttles lived on the grandfather's property, not all of them able to work. Five of Cyrus's younger siblings were younger than eight, and two aunts were "idiotic," according to the U.S. census.⁹

Along with ten thousand other boys that year, Cyrus was a "hoggee," driving the animals that pulled the lines that tugged the boats along the waterway. The origin of the word "hoggee" isn't known, but some trace it to the British "hogger," a field laborer of the lowest class. Hoggees were almost always young boys. The work day was divided into six-hour increments. Cyrus walked fifteen miles, took a break, then walked another fifteen miles. After each shift, he loaded the animals onto the boat and traveled down the canal in the bow with them.¹⁰

The boys were away from home for the seven months of the season, and they were treated as adults, with the exception of their pay—eight dollars a month (about \$245 today), one-third of what the men earned. Most likely, Cyrus's boss—a private boat captain—was a tyrant. The captains dispensed the pay at the end of the season and so looked for reasons to fire them or make them mad enough to quit before the season ended. Some of the hoggees themselves were bullies. One large Irish boy tried to drive Cyrus off the job, and, if the official Koreshan story can be believed, Cyrus subdued him with a well-placed punch on the jaw. Working on the canal was an early lesson in capitalism, which Cyrus formed a lifelong distaste for.¹¹

The canal was Cyrus's school, and by all indications, he was ravenous for knowledge. He encountered a wide variety of people—not only boys like him, but passengers on the well-appointed packet boats: wealthy people and intellectuals, the pious and not-so-pious, preachers and prostitutes.

Cyrus was loose in a world of new thought and away from his pious Baptist family—though certainly not out of the grasp of itinerant preachers, who ministered to even the lowly canal boys, and other Christians, who were watching out for them and working to improve their conditions.

It's easy to imagine the slight boy, floating down the canal on his six-hour break beside his mules, his nose in his Bible, and then walking on the towpath,

eavesdropping on the conversations on deck. Certainly, walking thirty miles a day gave him plenty of time to be with these new thoughts, some of which he knew his family would find distasteful, like Swedenborgianism and Spiritualism. Pseudosciences like mesmerism and phrenology, popular at the time, would have fascinated Cyrus with their promise of bridging the natural and spiritual worlds. Social and economic ideas—like communism and land reform—also traveled up and down the canal.



At twenty, when it came time to choose a career, Cyrus chose medicine, going against his family's expectations. He hoped it could teach him the mysteries of the brain and body and put him directly in touch with the body's vital life force. He wanted to uncover something hidden in the spiritual realm. He was hardly alone in this. It was a national obsession. Preaching couldn't do this, especially now, as Baptists were turning away from science and frowning on mystics. He began an apprenticeship with his uncle, a physician and surgeon in Utica.¹²

That same year, he married his second cousin Fidelia ("faithful") Rowe, who was so petite she looked more like a child than an adult. And she *was* nearly a child, only sixteen, when they married. Her family "were not a particularly strong lot—mentally or physically," a cousin later wrote. The couple had a son, Arthur, and moved to Brooklyn so Cyrus could study medicine.¹³

Teed's studies were interrupted by the Civil War. When New York called for volunteers, there was no question that he would answer the call; he and all of his brothers served. Western New York had long been anti-slavery. In 1862, he enlisted, agreeing to serve for three years, entering as a corporal. Teed's followers would later revise that title to "medic." In Koreshan lore, it is written that "Doctor Teed" treated wounded soldiers, and when he did so, he noticed that the men with faith in a higher power recovered more quickly than the ones without faith. He doesn't seem to have corrected anyone who called him a Civil War doctor.¹⁴

If Corporal Teed had a realization about healing and faith during the Civil War, it happened when he was a patient, not a doctor. One year into his service, in August 1863, he collapsed from sunstroke on a march near Warrenton, Virginia, and suffered partial paralysis of his left leg. He was hospitalized in Alexandria for two months—more time with his thoughts; no improvement in his condition—before being discharged, deemed unfit even for the invalid corps.

He recovered from the paralysis and returned to studying medicine, completing his degree at the Eclectic Medical College of the City of New York in 1868, in the second graduating class.¹⁵