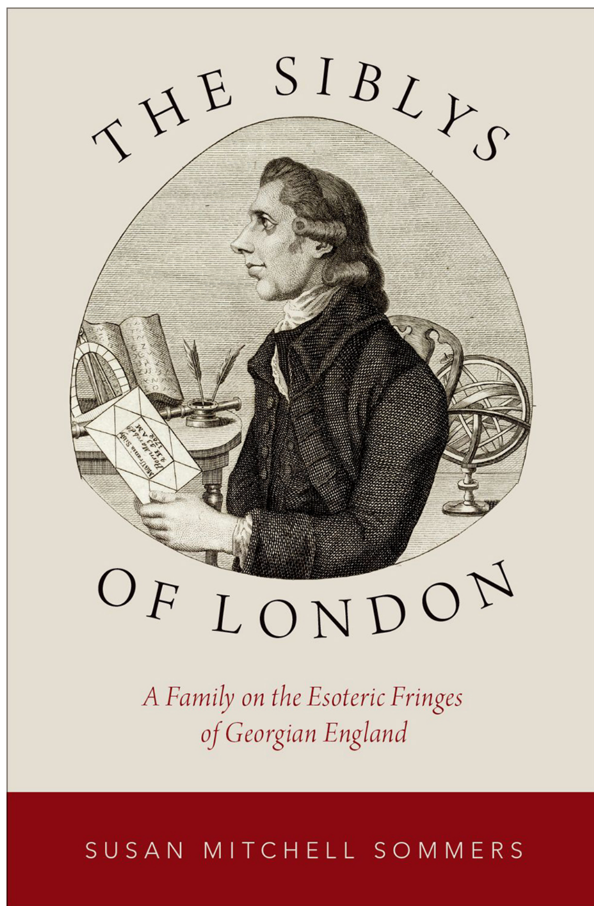

R E V I E W

Susan Mitchell Sommers. *The Siblys of London: A Family on the Esoteric Fringes of Georgian England*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2018. xx + 340 pp. $125.00/£87.00, hardcover.

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1 Even though William and Catherine Blake are mentioned on only a handful of pages, Blakeans will be thoroughly intrigued by Susan Mitchell Sommers's *The Siblys of London: A Family on the Esoteric Fringes of Georgian London* for its portrayal of groups and eclectic discourses close to, and sometimes touching, the Blakes. The Siblys were a family of booksellers who specialized in the occult, publishing on such topics as astrology, alchemy, witchcraft, and prophecy. The book focuses largely on the two oldest brothers, Manoah (1757–1840), a Swedenborgian minister and Bank of England employee, whom the Blakes almost certainly met, and Ebenezer (1750–99), a bookseller, freemason, quack, astrologer, political operative, bigamist, and self-described male midwife and alchemist. As Sommers points out, when the Siblys have been considered at all, they have been examined from various disciplinary frames that often misconstrued their larger lives and work. Accordingly, one of the real strengths of the book is Sommers's careful engagement with, and correction of, the existing scholarship, based on detailed, documented research.

2 All of the Sibly men were cobblers at one point before turning to bookselling sometime between 1779 and 1787. Sommers demonstrates that despite claims that the family originated in Bristol (where Ebenezer lived for a time), it was from London, with its most recent roots in the parish of St. Giles-without-Cripplegate (9). The father, Edmund Sibly (d. 1799), was a Particular Baptist, and his bookshop was located on Brick Lane, Spitalfields. He had three or four wives, and surviving children with the last three. The second wife, Mary Larkholm, was the mother of Kezia (1748–87) and Ebenezer; the third, Charity Standard (d. 1768), was the mother of Manoah and Job (1760–1815); and the fourth, Elizabeth Read, was the mother of Charity (1772–1847).

3 While the men of the family receive the most attention, Sommers tries to highlight what can be known about the women. After her father's death, the younger Charity and her first husband took over the Brick Lane bookshop, and Charity later amassed a number of leasehold estates (10). The older daughter, Kezia, died in labor; she was the subject of an astrologically rooted biographical sketch by her brother Ebenezer, and Manoah's obituary states that she filled a maternal role after the death of his mother.

4 The youngest and least studied brother, Job, was a publisher of sermons that he transcribed and printed, in many cases, without the knowledge of the minister. Two of these ministers were the Quaker William Savery, who left a record of his encounter with Job at the latter's bookshop, and the Calvinist evangelical Thomas Wills. Between 1807 and 1815, Job was a stenographer for the Old Bailey, and he published the most sensational trials, as well as arguments for the rights of Dissenters. Sommers suggests that Job was the most politically radical of all the brothers, and argues that none of the other Sibly men was "particularly engaged in politics, radi-

cal or otherwise" (193), despite the efforts of some scholars to place them in the tradition of radical shoemakers that stretched from "Jacob Böhme to Thomas Holcroft" (192).

5 Sommers focuses much of the book on Ebenezer. Whereas previous scholars have assumed that his activities and writings were sincere, she characterizes him as more of an opportunist who was "intellectually and morally flexible" (75) and who "often misrepresented himself in print" (35). In 1779, Ebenezer opened his first bookshop, in Portsmouth, where he had moved with his second wife, even while the first wife was still living in London. (He would leave this first wife a £20 annuity in his 1799 will.) In Portsmouth, he became a freemason, and he began using masonic imagery in his publications and advertisements and puffing up his connections with various orders and lodges (both real and invented). While Ebenezer has been labeled a Swedenborgian freemason, Sommers clarifies that he was a freemason but not a Swedenborgian, while Manoah was a Swedenborgian but not a freemason. (Indeed, she points out that Benedict Chastanier was the only man named in the rolls of the *Minute Book of the Society for Promoting the Heavenly Doctrines of the New Jerusalem Church Eastcheap London* between May 1787 and November 1791 who was both a Swedenborgian and a freemason.) In 1784, Ebenezer moved to Bristol, where he probably saw the business potential of "electrical medicine, Mesmerism, and animal magnetism" (70), but his medical endeavors were cut short when he was caught selling counterfeit lottery tickets in 1786 (67-69). Around the same time, his wife died in childbirth, and he returned to London after remarrying (and fathering a bastard child in Marlborough, Wiltshire).

6 In London, Ebenezer showed interest in Paracelsus, Franz Anton Mesmer, and John Bell (a practitioner of Mesmerism, who lived in Golden Square). Having already taken the name "E. Sibly Astro-Philo" (80), he joined the College for Instructing Pupils in Mesmer's Philosophy, alongside Bell and Stephen Freeman, who himself was a freemason, Rosicrucian, and a member of the Jerusalem Sols. In Bristol and London, Ebenezer's publications were largely plagiarized compilations on astrology and medicine, and they were often reprinted as new editions or offered under new titles. These include *An Illustration of the Celestial Science of Astrology* (1784–90?) and *A Key to Physic, and the Occult Sciences* (1792), and Sommers notes how "some images were original; others were either copies or adaptations from earlier book illustrations" (163). Ebenezer's "use" of seventeenth-century sources has led some to consider him an important figure in Counter-Enlightenment thought, but Sommers expresses skepticism that he ever had a coherent philosophy, writing instead that he "consistently chose the shortest route to a cash payoff" (103).

7 This was particularly true of his activities as a medical quack. In Bristol, he had become aware of the work of the Society for the Rescue of Persons Apparently Drowned, which reflected wider interest in the reanimation of drowning victims and fear of the premature burial of people who were still alive. In 1792, he bought a medical degree from King's College, Aberdeen, and subsequently fashioning himself a doctor, he began selling his most famous and most lucrative product, Dr. Sibly's Reanimating Solar Tincture. The tincture was soon complemented by a Lunar Tincture for women, which was marketed along with his *Medical Mirror: Or Treatise on the Impregnation of the Human Female* (1794), "the feminine pendant to *A Key to Physic*" (167).

8 Despite his various schemes for making money, Ebenezer had to declare bankruptcy in 1794. He was, however, coincidentally robbed two weeks before the notice of the bankruptcy was published, and Sommers strongly suspects he had a hand in the robbery (142-43). Emerging from the bankruptcy later in that year, he went on publishing and selling his tinctures until his death in 1799. After his death, Ebenezer's daughter, Urania, and his last business partner, Charles Saffell, fought over the patent rights to the Solar Tincture, and both Urania and Saffell's daughter-in-law would independently sell the product through the 1870s (279).

9 More important for the history of esoterism is Ebenezer's work in collecting and transcribing occult manuscripts between 1789 and 1795. (Given that just one of these manuscripts was offered for 200 guineas in the *Morning Herald* in 1797 [246n26], Sommers suggests that Ebenezer's passion for this material may have been behind his bankruptcy.) Many of the items owned by Ebenezer were listed in the early nineteenth-century sale catalogues of John Denley, but later in the century, many legends would accrue around which items his library actually contained. Sommers notes that Saffell, who served as Ebenezer's executor, did not, strangely enough, note any books in his accounting of Ebenezer's estate. This fact leads her to argue that the library must have consisted exclusively of manuscripts, which Saffell had described simply as "three sacks of old papers" (244). Examining nineteenth-century sale catalogues and modern collections, Sommers adds thirteen works to those offered by Denley and provides in the appendix the most complete list of the items held by Ebenezer. This bibliographical activity was easily his most substantial legacy.

10 Ebenezer's half-brother Manoah is the subject of only about a quarter of the book. In contrast to Ebenezer, he seems staid, being "only" a Swedenborgian minister and bookseller. Like his father and brothers, Manoah began as a shoemaker, but by the 1770s he had learned shorthand (Sommers sug-

gests it was Thomas Gurney's popular method) and began publishing Baptist sermons that he had transcribed. In 1779 he opened his bookshop at 35 Goswell Street (where it was to remain for his entire career), and it was soon known for having the largest supply in London of books on astrology, alchemy, and other occult subjects. He republished astrological works, and sometimes shared material with Ebenezer (and vice versa).

11 In the mid-1780s, Manoah was exposed to Swedenborgianism and quickly became a seller of Swedenborg's books. In 1787, he joined the New Church, before it had officially separated from the Established Church. Sommers highlights some of the tensions between Manoah and Robert Hindmarsh, who is often seen as representing Swedenborgian orthodoxy. As she points out, Hindmarsh was critical of astrology (188), and this criticism, she suggests, led Manoah to discontinue his astrological work. In turn, Manoah rejected the idea that Swedenborg's *Conjugial Love* advocated concubinage; this debate tore apart the Great East Cheap Society in 1789, with Hindmarsh, Carl Wadström, Augustus Nordenskjöld, and others separating from the new denomination (218-19). By the 1790s, Manoah was one of the chief ministers of, and apologists for, the New Jerusalem Church, a position he held for the remainder of his life. All the while, he continued his shorthand work, and from 1792 to 1795 he was the official transcriber at the Old Bailey. He also did other paid shorthand work, recording for the London Corresponding Society the trial of its founder, Thomas Hardy. In 1797, Manoah began his career in the Bank of England, which he maintained until just before his death in 1840.

12 Manoah was a leader of the April 1789 General Conference that William and Catherine attended, and Sommers points out that one of the goals of the conference was to "affirm the separation of the New Church from the old" (230). It was largely Manoah's work in establishing this new church along orthodox lines that, Sommers suggests, laid the groundwork for Blake's rejection of Swedenborg:

> William Blake was driven away from Swedenborg not just by his disenchantment with Swedenborg's writings, but also by his revulsion for the infant denomination founded upon Swedenborg's vision, and by at least one of its most notable leaders, Manoah Sibly, comfortable as he was with ritual, ceremonies, and social respectability. (234)

What surely would have been another point of contention for Blake was Manoah's belief that "Swedenborg's revelation was complete, and that it was unacceptable and fruitless for others to attempt to replicate the seer's communication with spirits" (223); she also points out that at the 1791 General Conference, ceremonial clerical robes were approved (232).

13 Much of Sommers's discussion of Manoah centers on Blake and on trying to justify her claim that Manoah was behind Blake's rejection of Swedenborg. While it is mostly persuasive, especially in her account of Hindmarsh's position in the church, she spends little time considering the role played by other orthodox Swedenborgians, such as Joseph Proud, whose hymnbook, for example, was adopted at the same time as the new liturgy and who, according to Henry Crabb Robinson, invited Blake to join the church.[1] The focus on Blake also shortchanges both Manoah's own relationship to these figures and his own work—as a publisher, theologian, and leader of the New Jerusalem Church—in comparison to the detailed account she provides for Ebenezer. At the same time, many interesting parallels between Blake and the two brothers go unnoticed. Manoah, for example, adopted a new calendar in his Swedenborgian pamphlet *An Answer to the Most Important Question* (1792) that designated the 1756 publication of Swedenborg's *Arcana Coelestia* as year 0. This practice must have been at play, then, when Blake parodied the notion in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, and the fact that both Blake and Manoah were born in 1757 seems significant to the satire. (Both men would also be buried in Bunhill Fields, with Blake in an unmarked grave and Manoah given a tombstone.) In her discussions of Ebenezer, there are no references to Blake, even though she observes that Ebenezer believed that Indian astrology was derived from British druids (38) and records how a review[2] of a German translation of Ebenezer's *Medical Mirror* scoffed at his argument that "Adam was a hermaphrodite, and translucent" (36).

14 But recognizing and exploring these and other potential connections will delight most readers. The other few but real weaknesses in the book emanate from the overwhelming nature of its riches. Given the focus on different generations of a family, it would have benefited from genealogical charts. Likewise, while the chapters on Ebenezer and Manoah are ostensibly in chronological order, Sommers often skips to later publications written on the same theme, so separate chronologies of each major family member would have been useful for tracing their activities and major publications. Finally, though her record of the manuscripts in Ebenezer's library will be a vital resource for readers, a list of the known publications offered by each shop (including the different editions and titles of the same works) and related booksellers, printers, engravers, and the like would have helped to sketch out in full the publishing networks in which the Siblys participated.

1. G. E. Bentley, Jr., *Blake Records*, 2nd ed. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004) 599.
2. *Allgemeine Literatur-Zeitung* (March 1798): col. 552.