

Abode of Love

Kate Barlow's memoir provides a first-hand look at life in a religious community

story by Deborah Everest-Hill
photo by Peter C. McCusker

Growing

Growing up on her grandmother's estate in the English countryside, Kate Barlow spent much of her time exploring the home's many rooms to uncover the truth about the people who lived there. While she knew there was something different about her life among twenty elderly women, she had no idea that her family's unique lifestyle would eventually inspire her to write a book. *The Abode of Love: Life in a Messianic Cult*, chronicles Barlow's experiences growing up in an Agapemone, the Greek term for Abode of Love. Henry James Prince founded the religious community in the village of Spaxton in Somerset, England in the mid 1800s. Prince was a clergyman who claimed to be guided personally by the Holy Ghost and his followers, Agapemonites, believed the Second Coming of Christ was imminent.

When Prince died Barlow's grandfather J. H. Smyth-Pigott, also a clergyman, took over leadership of the group. Smyth-Pigott believed he was the reincarnation of Jesus Christ and, despite being married, took Barlow's grandmother Annie (Ruth) Preece as a "spiritual bride". Smyth-Pigott had three children with Preece and was defrocked by the Church of England as a result. These children were christened Glory, Power and Life. Life, the youngest child and only girl, was known as Lavita; she was Barlow's mother.

Because *The Abode of Love* is a memoir, the majority of its content comes from Barlow's memories. She didn't discover anything shocking, but Barlow admits researching her family's past was "like unlocking a drawer in a filing cabinet." There was ample information to sift through and, while she found answers to some questions, she was left wondering about others. Another challenge was the fact that much of what had been published was inaccurate and sensational. "Nothing had been written by someone who lived there," notes Barlow.



"When I decided to write a book, I wanted to tell the story the way I remembered it."

It took Barlow seven years to write *The Abode of Love*. Working full time at the Hamilton Spectator, she woke up early every morning to work on the book for two hours before going to work. While she took breaks from the project for six months to a year, something always inspired her to return to it. "I love the act of writing and I was determined to do it," she says. "Once I had sorted it out in my mind and on paper, I could move on and be done with it."

While Barlow's sisters knew she was writing a book, the three siblings rarely talked about it. "It was something I wanted to do on my own," notes Barlow. "My sisters are older and their memories are different." When the book was published in 2006, her sisters' reactions were mixed. Ann had worked through her feelings about the past and liked the book while Margaret was uncomfortable with its contents and unable to finish it. One message Barlow hopes readers will gain from the book is the danger in judging others too quickly. "My upbringing was different but I was cherished and valued as a child—by far the most important thing."

Barlow remembers what seemed like “endless days” on the estate and a feeling of “almost total freedom.” Many Agapemonites were wealthy unmarried women and when Barlow moved to the estate when she was seven, 20 women in their 80’s and 90’s continued to live there. The only young child in the home at the time, Barlow was free to explore the estate and drink tea with women who she describes as “extraordinary”. She investigated every room, looked through her housemates’ things and had the run of the grounds. At meal time, her mother and older sisters dined with her grandmother while Barlow, who was too young to join the “holy family”, ate in the long dining room with the rest of the community. These occasions afforded her an opportunity to ask questions and get to know several women who had lead remarkable lives. Among these, was an architect who continued to design homes in her 80s and a woman who nursed John Brown, Queen Victoria’s servant. Naturally curious, Barlow asked many questions during her time on the estate and received few answers. However, her tenacity proved valuable years later in her quest to be a journalist. “I knew I wanted to be a newspaper reporter at sixteen, when I saw them hanging about outside my

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home. But it wasn’t until I had moved to Canada that I found time to work on my ambition.”

Barlow was 39, married and had two sons when she moved to Canada in 1980. She began writing and approached the managing editor of the Hamilton Spectator about a job, but he turned her down because she had no formal training. Barlow took his advice and attended Sheridan College in the early 80s, graduating at the top of her class. Ironically, she received the silver medal in journalism from a representative of the Spectator, a moment she continues to relish.

After working for the Ancaster News for a little over a year, Barlow’s persistence with the same Spectator editor paid off. She applied for a job with the newspaper, got it, and remained there for 13 years before retiring.

Today, she enjoys reading, travelling and spending time with her family. She is working on another book, but this time it’s about someone else’s life.

Abode of Love: Life in a Messianic Cult was published by Mainstream publishing. It is available at the Oakville Public Library and can be ordered by your local book store or by visiting www.gooselane.com