ForeWord Reviews

AUTOBIOGRAPHY & MEMOIR

Kindred Spirits: 400 Years of an American Family
Joe David Bellamy
PublishingWorks
978-1-935557-72-2
(April 2011)

In his essay "Memoir," for the New York Times Book Review section last January, Neil Genzlinger called for "A moment of silence, please, for the lost art of shutting up," thus beginning a terse review of four recently published memoirs, three of which he concluded never should have been published. "If you didn't feel you were discovering something as you wrote your memoir, don't publish it." By that standard, Joe David Bellamy's Kindred Spirits: 400 Years of an American Family is an outstanding candidate for publication.

His father having died long before, Joe Bellamy became, upon the death of his mother in his middle years, an orphan yearning for a sense of connectedness to family. He channeled this sense of loss into an interest in genealogy which he describes as "close to obsession," concluding, "I was perhaps the first person in my lineage, a lineage that was undoubtedly ancient…with the opportunity to discover whatever past there was." He thus felt a responsibility and began searching for his roots.

Kindred Spirits is the erudite chronicle of that search, including occasional comments on the art of genealogical research. Bellamy has the ability to share his discovery of family matters so as to make the ordinary seem remarkable. His description of his father's failed attempt at redirecting his life on an Ohio farm portrays this near tragic experience as an almost noble adventure.

The story also is populated with the author's fascinating ancestors: The Reverend Peter Bulkeley, a successful English minister during the mid-1600's, fled England along with other Puritans to find a home in New England. Bulkeley became a well-known and highly regarded Puritan minister in New England and the founder of the village of Concord, Massachusetts. He donated his own library to help begin Harvard's book collection.

Bellamy has a great facility for recreating the lives of many of his ancestors, highlighting the significant historical context in which they lived. He introduces his Swiss Mennonite relatives, for example, and relates how these gentle people were persecuted horribly during the Reformation.

A distinguished college professor, Bellamy served as the Director of the Literature Program of the National Endowment for the Arts. Kindred Spirits benefits largely from his considerable talents as a storyteller and writer.

John Michael Senger