

This Month in the not so distant past

Looking back at historical moments that happened in January,
John Davis highlights **Ann Lee**

It seems writers, producers and directors are willing to make musical theatre out of any story these days.

The sinking of RMS Titanic with a huge loss of life in 1912 has spawned at least two musical presentations and one of the biggest hits in the West End during 2025 was *Operation Mincemeat*. This, described as a musical comedy, retells the story of a clandestine operation in World War Two when the British dressed a dead body in army uniform, attached to it a set of so called 'secret' papers and set it adrift in the Mediterranean. The hope was it would be found by enemy spies who would use the information to persuade the Axis Powers that Allied landings would soon take place in Greece instead of the intended location in Italy. It worked and the ruse proved to be one of the most successful deceptions of WWII.

The latest production is *The Testament of Ann Lee*, a musical drama, due to premier in cinemas later this month which relates the story of the founder of the United Society of Believers in Christ's Second Appearing, often colloquially known as The Shakers.

Ann Lee, was born on February 29th, 1736 in Manchester. Her birth and early years were dominated by an evangelical revival in Britain fuelled by itinerant preachers like John and Charles Wesley, George Whitfield and later William Booth who went on to found the Salvation Army.

Lee was born into a distinct branch of the Society of Friends (a sect of the Quakers) where her father, a blacksmith by trade, and her mother were members. Ann, like the other children in the family, received no formal education. She remained illiterate for the rest of her life and signed with a cross.

With child labour the mainstay of the textile industry in Manchester, Ann first worked in cotton factories and later became a cutter in the millinery trade. By the age of twenty she was working as a cook in a Manchester infirmary which was also the local asylum.

In 1758 she had become a member of a religious group founded by John and Jane Wordley. This was to be a precursor of The Shaker sect. Adherents were often called the Shaking Quakers because of links to

similar groups well known for their overtly energetic chanting and dancing during the purging of sins by the Holy Spirit. The Wordleys were firm believers in the Second Coming and maintained that God would return in the form of a woman.

Lee and her followers stood firmly neutral, asserting they were pacifists who did not side with either the Americans or the British

Ann Lee proclaimed that she was indeed this woman and received the title of Mother Ann after founding her own group. Although she was later forced to marry and had four children, all of whom died in infancy, she strongly advocated celibacy because she believed the association of Adam and Eve should be classed as the 'great sin'. Ann's 'sham' marriage and the losses of the children only solidified her beliefs that celibacy and the abandonment of marriage were paramount. As the cult continued to grow, Mother Ann spoke of visions and messages from God. She claimed that when questioned by a group of high-ranking clergymen she had spoken for some four hours in over fifty different tongues.

For breaking rules of blasphemy and dancing on the Sabbath, she spent several lengthy spells in prison and, as a consequence of continued persecution, decided, in 1774, to take a select group of followers to the Americas. The nine members arrived in New York City in August and stayed for almost five years.

Then in 1779 they moved to Albany in New York State and developed a thriving and unique community life. During the American War of Independence, Lee and her followers stood firmly neutral, asserting they were pacifists who did not side with either the Americans or the British.

Several smaller sects joined The Shakers and in the spring of 1781 Mother Ann and her followers embarked on an extensive missionary journey



Amanda Seyfried in The Testament of Ann Lee

seeking converts in Massachusetts and Connecticut. During this mission, it is estimated they converted many followers with eighteen Shaker villages being established. Witnesses recorded that Mother Ann performed many miracles. The sect seemed to flourish, making many conversions especially in groups who were already outside mainstream religion in New England. They were not without their critics though. Following one serious fracas with a mob, Ann Lee's brother William was badly injured and in the fallout the missionaries returned to their home base. William never recovered and died in 1784. Several months later Mother Ann also passed away. She was only 48 years old. The fact that her followers considered Ann Lee to be the female counterpart of Jesus Christ was at the time unique although several women since have made similar claims and been accepted by their followers.

At its peak in the mid-nineteenth century, The Shaker movement had some 5000 members based in eighteen major centres. By 1920 this had reduced to twelve villages although financially the movement was flourishing as The Shakers became pioneers throughout America in marketing medicinal herbs and packet seeds. Economic competition later hit their businesses hard however and growth was further hampered through the sect's strict rule of celibacy

which prevented the birth of future members. Many former settlements are now Shaker museums but, at the time of writing, there is only one remaining settlement in Maine with a handful of adherents.

Note 1: The musical *The Testament of Ann Lee* is co-written by and directed by Mona Fastvold. It stars Amanda Seyfried in the title role. It was shown at the Venice Film Festival last year, opened in the USA in December and is due for cinema release in Britain on February 20th.

Note 2: Although perhaps past its prime, Shaker furniture is still popular with its emphasis on lack of decoration, durability and functionality. Many Shaker followers were highly skilled craftspeople and members have been credited with a number of important inventions including wood-burning stoves, the circular saw and a wheel-driven washing machine.

Semi-retired and living in Lyme Regis, John Davis started working life as a newspaper journalist before moving on to teach in schools, colleges and as a private tutor. He is a history graduate with Bachelors and Masters degrees from Bristol University with a particular interest in the History of Education and Twentieth Century European History.