Timothy Grieve-Carlson. *American Aurora: Environment and Apocalypse in the Life of Johannes Kelpius*. Oxford & New York City: Oxford University Press, 2024. *xiii* + 310 pp. ISBN: 9780197765562 (hardcover), 9780197765579 (paperback). £78 (hardcover), £26 (paperback).

Environmental history emerged as a field of study in the second half of the twentieth century, following the momentum of *Silent Spring* (1962), the seminal work by conservationist and biologist Rachel Carson. Its early research paradigm had strong affinities with intellectual history, but shifts that came about just before the turn of the millennium have made these two subdisciplines of history drift apart in the last few decades. Quite recently, environmental historian Paul Sutter wrote in a review article reflecting on the modest renewal of their cross-pollination: "For the sake of both fields, it's time to restore the fragmented habitats that have isolated our subdisciplines."[1] This brief outline illustrates *American Aurora*'s importance for the history of esotericism, which is closely related to intellectual history. Terms like "nature" and related concepts are ubiquitous in esotericism studies, but this omnipresence has not resulted in the widespread use of environmental-historical approaches. Together with works like Dan McKanan's *Eco-Alchemy* (2017) and Devin Zuber's *A Language of Things* (2019), *American Aurora* is one among the very few monographs in this academic domain to integrate such perspectives into its analytical framework.

Timothy Grieve-Carlson, after pointing out the relationship between seventeenth-century environmental conditions and Hermetic and alchemical ideas, makes an important statement: "I think this is a missed opportunity for scholars of esotericism, who do not often locate their analyses in the history of environmental thought, since this is exactly where many environmental

1. Paul S. Sutter, "Putting the Intellectual Back in Environmental History," *Modern Intellectual History* 18, no. 2 (2021): 569–605.

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historians locate the very same subjects" (12). He names Carolyn Merchant's *Death of Nature* (1980) and Philipp Blom's *Nature's Mutiny* (2019) here: not only before, but also since the aforementioned paradigm shift, a few environmental historians have dealt with subjects we now place under the rubric of esotericism. It is high time to rectify such missed opportunities — from our end — and incorporate these perspectives into the history of esotericism, a turn that Grieve-Carlson pioneers with this book. *American Aurora* focuses on Transylvanian-Saxon Pietist ascetic Johannes Kelpius (1667–1708), the religious, socio-political, and environmental contexts in which he was embedded, as well as his reception in popular culture and scholarship from the eighteenth century to the present.

Grieve-Carlson provides the reader with ample contextualisation of the topic. After an informative introduction laying out the analytical focus of the book, the first chapter illustrates the importance of interpreting celestial phenomena such as comets and eclipses for people like Kelpius and many of his contemporaries in a turbulent world rocked by religious intolerance, crises of piety, and the environmental effects of the Little Ice Age — a cold period during early modernity that peaked in the late seventeenth century, coinciding with Kelpius's lifetime. A concept coined in the introduction is utilised here: *environmental knowledge*, which consists of interpretations of the cosmos informed by Hermetic modes of thought, emphasising the vitalistic character of a world through which humans are in dialogue with God. Besides treatment of the formative influences of contemporaries on Kelpius after he moved from Transylvania to Germany, Grieve-Carlson explains the importance of three foundational figures for the development of environmental knowledge in what he calls "Hermetic Protestantism": namely the radical theologians Paracelsus (1493–1541), Johann Arndt (1555–1621), and Jakob Böhme (1575–1624).

In Chapter Two, we move on to the local context where Kelpius would settle in the 1690s: Pennsylvania, an outpost for heterodox Christians at the time, including many Quakers and Pietists. The analytical value of environmental

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knowledge is really demonstrated here, as Grieve-Carlson shows the intertextual significance of the three figures listed above for the cosmologies developed in colonial America. These cosmologies fundamentally informed the ways in which the relevant historical actors related both to the world around them as well as to the indigenous people living in the area, called the Lenape. The text strikes an impressive balance between applying analytical rigour to the worldviews in question as well as to products of said worldviews, such as agricultural almanacs, while also paying crucial attention to the socio-political consequences of the European colonial project in what is, based on Lenape creation narratives, often referred to as Turtle Island. *American Aurora* is not concerned with abstract ideas removed from the material conditions out of which they emerged, but explains how environmental knowledge informed praxis in early-modern Pennsylvania.

Chapter Three, which Grieve-Carlson calls the heart of the book, provides a more detailed background of Kelpius and his community tucked away in the Wissahickon Gorge, a few miles outside of Germantown, Pennsylvania. It lays a solid foundation for one of the book's aims: to serve as a rectification in the appraisal of Kelpius and his community, peeling away many discursive layers that have accumulated over 300 years. This historiographical sediment has often overcompensated for the perceived paucity of primary source material, inevitably obscuring it in the process. Through Kelpius's journal and his academic work, the writings of his close friends and fellow Wissahickon hermits, such as Johann Gottfried Seelig (1668–1745), and those of others in both the close circle and the periphery, as well as an analysis of religious and political issues in Pennsylvania at the time, we get a grasp of the social structure and ideas held by this community. By tracking correspondence with visitors and community members who outlived Kelpius, reliable insights extend far into the eighteenth century.

In a letter from 1706 to a Quaker missionary, Kelpius mentions a "threefold wilderness state," which is the subject of Chapter Four. This entails a technique of self-negation that draws from the wellspring of Hermeticism and a personal biblical

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exegesis, especially of Revelation 12. In describing its stages, Grieve-Carlson unpacks the ambiguity and complexity of a term like "wilderness." Here it is considered as much a place as a mental state and cannot be separated from its biblical connotations, including the journey from Egypt to Canaan by the Israelites under Moses's leadership, and the importance of wilderness for the narratives of John the Baptist and Jesus Christ. In navigating these stages, reading signs in the world itself was crucial. Grieve-Carlson points out well how Kelpius's practice, despite the trappings of desert asceticism, is quintessentially modern: all inspiration for the threefold wilderness state — whether ancient, medieval, or early modern — was filtered through his natural-philosophical experimentalism. The environment in which these historical figures lived is of paramount importance here and underlies all the religious and cosmological motifs present in the chapter.

The reception of Kelpius in the novel *Wieland* (1798) by American author Charles Brockden Brown (1771–1810) form the basis of Chapter Five. The story revolves around the Wieland family, German immigrants living in Pennsylvania, echoing the Wissahickon hermits. Grieve-Carlson foregrounds the epistemic chasm of the Enlightenment standing between Kelpius and Brown, while showing how the narrative nevertheless articulates the logic of environmental knowledge. Those layers of reception that Grieve-Carlson had peeled away in Chapter Four are not discarded but mostly reserved for Chapter Six. While a lot of that material at best does not help, and at worst frustrates, attempts at reconstructing the "historical Kelpius," it is nevertheless invaluable for investigating the reception of the Transylvanian-Pennsylvanian Pietist from the eighteenth century onwards. Grieve-Carlson evaluates many contributions to this reception, both big and small, and those of confessional, historical, and literary character. The text shows serious erudition and breadth in contextualising a rather long period without losing its focus on the evolving cultural representations of Kelpius.

Before we move on to my final evaluation of *American Aurora*, it is necessary to talk about a facet of the book that has not been mentioned so far: the *vitae*. Grieve-

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Carlson has chosen to reserve Kelpius's biographical aspects for three short sections between some of the chapters, detailing his life in Europe, while crossing the Atlantic, and when settled in Pennsylvania. In my view, a lot of this material could have worked just as well in the form of a prologue that contextualises the contents of the chapters beforehand, or could have been distributed among the relevant chapters, but the *vitae* set the stage well for the material that follows. One benefit of this structure is that the analytical pace of the six chapters is not interrupted.

American Aurora is a very solid contribution to the study of Johannes Kelpius, his associates, and the broader history of religion and spirituality in the Thirteen Colonies. Grieve-Carlson brings Hermetic modes of thought to the forefront and underscores the importance of environmental knowledge for the worldviews propagated by many of these historical figures. He also accomplishes many interrelated but distinct tasks with this book, including tracing a "prehistory" of aspects of the paranormal, as it would later be known. In my opinion, his biggest achievement pertains to the domain with which I began this review: demonstrating the importance of environmental-historical and ecocritical perspectives for the study of esotericism and analysing his sources with such a research programme in mind. Besides this methodological contribution, the concept of environmental knowledge will prove a useful theoretical lens for many scholars working on topics within the wider rubric of esotericism. *American Aurora* is strongly recommended to those working within, or with an interest in, the study of esotericism, environmental history, religious studies, intellectual history, history of science, and adjacent domains of scholarship.

Tjalling D. Janssen
t.d.janssen@uva.nl

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