In 20 years of living communally I had often pondered the source(s) of the various myths and given wisdom’s that were regularly ‘quoted’ by both critics and friends of intentional communities ... “that religious communities last longer and are more stable than secular ones, that groups that have a strong ideological basis are more robust and avoid communal life-threatening conflict or that 25 years longevity is somehow the benchmark for communal success.”  No one ever seemed to be able to say where these ideas had originated or point to any research to back them up. But they persisted in communal circles as anecdotal wisdom that was very hard to argue against if you suspected, as I did, that they weren’t entirely universal truths. I now know where to point the finger. It looks like much of this communal wisdom stems from a 1970s book by American sociologist Rosabeth Moss Kanter(1) and in Living in Utopia Sargisson and Sargent provide research and argument that goes a long way to debunking this mythology.

In their historical, sociological and political study of past and present intentional communities in New Zealand the authors between them cover the subject from a variety of angles; a broad look at utopian thought in New Zealand society and culture, the influence of Maori communal traditions, a historical look at communal experiments (helped enormously by the fact that the National Library of New Zealand has seen fit to collect an archive of communal living – something I should think that is pretty unique) and finally some in-depth first hand research into contemporary communities with very interesting explorations of ‘conflict in community’ and a final chapter entitled What Have We learned? Lasting Lessons from New Zealand – an attempt, rare by any academics, to make their research have a relevance to those involved in existing communal ventures.
Lucy Sargisson (University of Nottingham UK) and Lyman Tower Sargent (University of Missouri-St Louis USA) are currently perhaps part of only a dozen or so academics and researchers doing serious study of intentional communities and utopian thought worldwide. They cover the 50 odd communities in the book with both a deft, analytical touch and the sympathy of critical friends. I found the picture painted of the wider utopian background that permeates New Zealand culture illuminating and the references to Maori communal traditions something I wish the authors had gone into in greater depth – though I understand why they felt it was outside the scope of their studies. There are clearly historical parallels with other national studies that have covered similar historical periods. What with the mix of anarchist inspired communes, religious sects and state sponsored land settlement schemes. And once the book gets on to the contemporary communities I felt as if at times they were describing my own experience of communal living in the UK.

Neither of the authors are social historians and this left me somewhat frustrated with the book. This is a serious and worthy book, sometimes a bit too much of a serious and worthy book. I longed for some pictures and more personal narrative to bring the communities to life. (Knowing that one of the community names was inspired by a location in a Dr Suess book, something the authors fail to mention, is the sort of anecdote that would have added a touch of communal reality to the occasionally dry academic tone). Still my appetite was well and truly wetted and I wanted to know much more about Beeville, Riverside, Gricklegrass, Wilderland, or the more recent communities of Otamatea, Anahata than the authors were going to tell me. Luckily a quick Google session came up with the following sites – so if like me you want to know more about present day intentional communities down under check out the following for starters:

Anahata Community (http://www.anahata.co.nz)
Riverside Community (http://www.nelson.planet.org.nz/riverside/)
Gricklegrass Community (http://www.gricklegrass.co.nz/homepage.html)
Eco-Village and Cohousing Association of New Zealand (http://www.converge.org.nz/evcnz/)

The other source of info on New Zealand communites is:

Utopianz - A guide to Intentional Communities and Communal Living in Aotearoa New Zealand (4). Modelled on the Diggers & Dreamers directory it lists 27 communities who welcome visitors. From eco-villages to co-housing, urban and rural communities to religious communities and yoga retreat centres.

www.diggersanddreamers.org.uk
If you want to know that secular communities can last as long as religious ones, that conflict can creep up and surprise even the most structured and ideologically strong group or consider that communal success might be measured by more than just longevity then you won’t be disappointed by dipping into *Living in Utopia*. Striking the balance between academic credibility and popular accessibility is a trick not many academic writers attempt, let alone carry off. Sargisson and Sargent almost carry it off.

Perhaps the only disappointing thing about *Living in Utopia* is the dystopian price tag – cheapest on www.amazon.co.uk is £46.99 – which means it is unlikely to grace the bookshelf of many intentional communities. So order it via the book utopia, otherwise known as a library!

Chris Coates, May 2006

**Biography**

Chris Coates; Squatter, street performer, carpenter, father, anarchist and communard, lived for twenty years at People in Common a small alternative community (based in Burnley, Lancashire) that grew out of the radical underground of the 1970s. He has been one of the editors of Diggers & Dreamers – the biennial journal and directory of communal living – since its inception in 1989. His book, *Utopia Britannica: British Utopian Experiments: 1325-1945* (2000) is the definitive work on the history of intentional communities in the UK. Currently works as a freelance consultant for community based building projects. In 2003 he was elected as a local councillor for the Green Party in his home town of Lancaster where he is currently part of a group trying to set up a cohousing scheme (http://www.lancastercohousing.org.uk)

**Notes**

1 *Commitment and Community; Communes and Utopias in Sociological Perspective*, Rosabeth Moss Kanter (1972) Harvard University Press.
3 *The Lorax*, Dr Seuss (1971) Wings Books
4 *Utopianz - A Guide to Intentional Communities and Communal Living in Aotearoa New Zealand*, available from: The STRAW Umbrella Trust, PO Box 33208 Barrington, Otautahi / Christchurch, Aotearoa / New Zealand (straw@paradise.net.nz)

www.diggersanddreamers.org.uk