

# New Perspectives on the Mormon Past

SECOND IN A SERIES ON THE WRITING OF HISTORY

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UNTIL the past twenty-five years, the very idea of Mormon history has been viewed as a joke by most professional historians. Despite the massive outpouring of dissertations and books devoted to studying Mormon history, virtually none were known or treated seriously outside the ranks of a handful of western history buffs, social historians, and other enthusiasts with highly specialized interests. Brigham Young University dissertations were seen as providing the classic stereotype of the genre. No matter what the topic, each dissertation seemed to begin with Joseph Smith's first vision and end with a stirring reaffirmation of the author's faith in the restored Mormon gospel. In between, almost as an afterthought, were sandwiched enormous masses of undigested data with no apparent organizing principle. Sober Mormon scholars could spend inordinate amounts of time trying to find evidence that Joseph Smith had really seen an angel—an argument that had about as much interest for non-Mormon historians as the debates of medieval scholastics over how many angels could dance on the head of a pin. Though Mormon history *was* written in English, it might just as well have appeared in an undeciphered foreign tongue for all the sense it made to the secular American scholar.

As a non-Mormon historian initially trying to get through this massive body of writing in order to better

understand the controversial origin and early development of Mormon polygamy, I struggled to comprehend the basis for this seemingly pointless collection of data. What was it that made Mormon historical writing so deadly dull to an outsider, yet of such great importance to an insider? Why did Mormon historians characteristically take their complex and fascinating history and turn it into such pablum? Above all, why were Mormons so preoccupied with detail and so uninterested in larger conceptual frameworks? Why didn't Mormons ever *do* anything intellectually with their history?

The answer was a long time in coming, but eventually it became clear that in the last analysis to be a Mormon meant to accept the idea that Mormonism explained everything. Mormons didn't use theories from other disciplines—with some rare exceptions—because they felt that they already knew all the answers (at least all the answers that really mattered). Most Mormon scholarship thus was simply a footnote which added more evidence to an already well-known and well-loved story. Mormon control and insularity extended even to thinking of historians and to their writing. It seemed that there were almost no intellectuals within Mormonism—or outside it for that matter—who could step back and view it freshly. Most Mormon scholars still appeared to think almost exclusively within the old



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categories. Disaffected Mormons such as Jerald and Sandra Tanner did no better; they simply stood the traditional Mormon arguments on their head. Instead of being a pasteboard saint, for instance, Joseph Smith became a malicious fraud. Even Fawn Brodie in her path-breaking biography spent all too much of her time carping that her Sunday school image of Joseph Smith hadn't been the full picture. And as always, the vast majority of non-Mormons outside the areas of Mormon cultural influence remained largely uninterested in such exclusively internal squabbles.

This isolation of Mormon scholarship from the mainstream of American historical writing was, it seemed to me, a most unfortunate situation. For in Mormonism, if anywhere in recent American life, was the sort of group that could provide almost "an ideal laboratory" for the social and intellectual historian of the sort that Perry Miller had found in the earlier New England Puritans. Growing out of deeply American roots, the Mormon people had rejected the pluralism of the dominant culture, and, indeed, of the modern world. They had, instead, set up a distinctive way of life and in their own manner had challenged a host of commonly-held assumptions about the way modern society inevitably must develop. And notwithstanding the great difficulties that they had faced, the Mormons had been remarkably successful—not simply in their own terms but also in terms of the wealth and power that the external society viewed as so significant. Surely both Mormons and non-Mormons could learn something of value about the extraordinary complexity of social change and the varied options for human development from the rich experience of the Latter-day Saints.

Fortunately, during the past twenty-five years numerous scholars have begun raising such questions and taking steps to bridge the gap between Mormon history and the scholarly world. Thomas O'Dea's fine sociological study in 1957 showed that an outsider could write sympathetically and fairly about the Mormons as a people among peoples, raising a host of issues with broader implications. Leonard Arrington's economic analysis a year later showed that a committed insider could place the epic Mormon struggle to develop the intermountain West into a larger context with meaning for other developing societies. Much of the best scholarship in Mormon history began to focus on the group's political aspirations and activities, and the ways

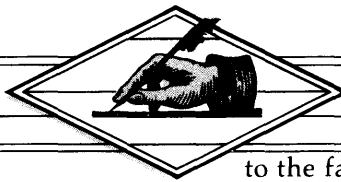
that those had been related to American values. Klaus Hansen started to reconstruct the activities of the secret Council of Fifty, a body which was potentially revolutionary in its rejection of American pluralism. Robert Flanders portrayed the social and economic life of Nauvoo, Illinois, viewing it as an unconventional Jacksonian boom town. And Jan Shipps used sophisticated sampling techniques to study attitudes toward Mormonism in the popular press—showing that, however strange Mormonism might appear, it still could be subjected to statistical analysis.

By the mid 1960s and early 1970s, three closely related developments emerged out of the growing interest in Mormon history. First, chronologically speaking, was the founding of the Mormon History Association in 1965. Representing all varieties of Mormon, RLDS, and non-Mormon perspectives, the MHA has grown into an organization of more than 1,000 members, publishing its own quality journal, and attracting more than 500 participants to its most recent annual meeting. Second, and almost simultaneous with the foundings of the MHA, was the establishment of *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* in 1966. Seeking genuine dialogue, not simply between Mormons of different persuasions but also between Mormons and non-Mormons who shared their ideas within its pages, *Dialogue* has continued to tackle important and often controversial issues which could not receive full consideration by in-house publications. Third, and in many ways most important, was the appointment in 1972 of a highly respected professional historian, Leonard Arrington, to head a

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reorganized and revitalized LDS Church Historical Department in Salt Lake City. Convinced that full and well-informed accounts could only strengthen the Mormon church in the long run, Arrington and his associates—who at their peak numbered nearly twenty full-time historians—encouraged the opening up of the Church Archives to serious scholars, both Mormon and non-Mormon alike, and began to put out many important studies themselves. A sense of excitement and exhilaration was generated as increasing numbers of Latter-day Saints began to develop a direct, personal sense of their own history, a deeper appreciation of the richness and complexity of the Mormon past.

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GREAT strides have certainly been made by Mormons during the past two decades in developing a truly informed, professional, and compelling



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history of their faith. Increasing numbers of non-Mormon scholars, too, have come to appreciate more fully the enormous social vitality of the Latter-day Saints. In the face of such achievements, it is particularly disappointing that so few non-Mormons have also become interested in the scholarly investigation of Mormonism as a religious movement. With the exception of Jan Shipps and a handful of others, non-Mormon scholars have shown little serious interest in the inner religious life that has given meaning to the external social activities of the Latter-day Saints.

This oversight is not accidental. To state the situation bluntly, most educated non-Mormons still find the religious side of the Latter-day Saints (as opposed to their purely social achievements) at best opaque and at worst absurd and unbelievable. The growing respect for Mormon social history has not spread as yet, except in rare cases, to similar respect for Mormon religious life. During the past decade, I have been at many informal non-Mormon gatherings in scholarly conferences at which the subject of Mormonism has arisen. Almost invariably at least one individual has turned to me and said something along the following lines: "One thing about them has always puzzled me. I have a valued Mormon colleague who seems to be an otherwise fine and intelligent person, but frankly it baffles me how any thinking individual could believe what he does. I just can't understand it."

I can understand this sense of disbelief as well. After all, this was my own initial reaction both to Mormons and to their history. Before I got to know Mormons better, they chiefly appeared to be hardworking, cleancut, loyal, thrifty, brave, clean, reverent—and utterly boring. No group ever talked more about free will (or in Mormon parlance "free agency") yet in practice seemed to exercise free will less in important matters. I was vividly reminded of a cartoon. It showed a large, overbearing woman talking with her neighbor while her small, shy husband dutifully sat on the couch, his hands meekly folded. The woman was saying: "Hubert has a will of iron; he just seldom gets a chance to use it." This for me was the epitome of Mormonism and why I found it basically uninteresting and even downright distasteful.

Popular Mormon history merely reinforced this unbelievable stereotype. Mormons throughout history, it seemed, had always been paragons of virtue, dedicated

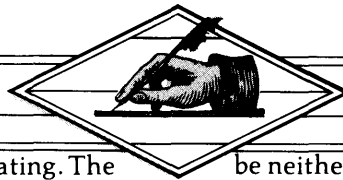
to the faith one hundred percent or more. They had never had any doubts or problems except how better to spread the "gospel" among the non-Mormons, who for inexplicable reasons were adamantly opposed to accepting the "truth." For me to give any credence to such narrowminded, pollyannaish writing was quite impossible. Even without any knowledge of what had actually gone on, I was certain that the official version couldn't be the full story. It would be more plausible to believe in the literal truth of Santa Claus. Surely there must be more to Mormon history than such naive accounts indicated if their church had been able to achieve the remarkable degree of success that it had.

My investigation of what has sometimes been called "the new Mormon history" finally led me into real appreciation of the Mormon past and what Mormonism might become in the future. In beginning research for a 1973 paper on the origin of Mormon polygamy, I fortuitously decided to read systematically through all the back issues of *Dialogue* to see what the current historical and religious concerns of Mormonism were. The result was a minor revelation. Latter-day Saints clearly were not simply a bunch of goody-goody zombies but in fact were real people who were struggling with many of the same questions that, in a different religious tradition, had also baffled and challenged me. Perhaps by studying the Mormons I could gain insight, not simply into their past but into my own as well.

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The Mormon past came even more vividly alive as I began to work closely in the printed and manuscript records, especially those in the Church Archives. What a fascinating cast of varied and interesting people I encountered. These were not the modern-day stereotype of dutiful, unquestioning, and unbelievable "saints" but real men and women who struggled in new and more creative ways to understand themselves, their faith, and their place in the world. Figures such as Joseph Smith and so many others became real to me as I read first hand of their personal efforts and triumphs and failures. Any group which could attract such talent and dedication was surely worthy of deeper investigation. What a pity that the narrowminded and poorly informed writers of Sunday School manuals and approved histories were ignorant of the vitality and richness of their own faith!

Nowhere was such blindness to their own history more pronounced than in Mormon treatments of



polygamy, the primary topic I was investigating. The most common approach seemed to be to say as little as possible about the subject, as though it were something of which to be ashamed. Only when talking about how inexplicably nasty and hostile non-Mormons were to the Saints was polygamy brought up, and then almost exclusively as a religious revelation that had been introduced to test the faith of the Saints. But working with the manuscript records, I became vividly aware of the importance that polygamy had had for nineteenth-

be neither faith promoting nor good history. Of course, it all depends on what kind of faith one is trying to promote. If one wishes to promote uninformed, unthinking acquiescence to the church as an institution that can do no wrong, then clearly the propagandistic approach is most suitable. But if one wishes to promote a mature faith, tested by a responsible exercise of free agency, then such an approach can only be destructive and self-defeating. All too many Saints seem to be less concerned with promoting faith in *Mormonism* and more concerned with promoting faith in the naive writings that have appeared *about* Mormonism, even if those accounts can be clearly shown to be misleading or inaccurate. It is indeed sad that for some Saints the horror of having any doubt is so great that they do not see the even greater horror of having a faith so small and shaky that they are afraid ever to doubt or test it for fear the whole structure would crumble. Realistic faith, it seems to me, must grow out of confidence rather than fear and defensiveness.

One of the most frequently voiced fears of Mormon conservatives is that serious historical writings may tend to "secularize" Mormonism. This view is a red herring, in my opinion. For believing Mormons to write either an exclusively "religious" or an exclusively "secular" version of their history is for them to make a false dichotomy since Mormonism, more than most

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century Mormons—not simply as a test of faith but also as an integral part of a total way of life. Although I personally found polygamy distasteful, clearly many of the men and women who practiced it were fine people who did so sincerely and to the best of their ability. Simply to ignore a practice for which they had struggled and sacrificed so long seemed to be doing fundamental violence to the history of Mormonism as a whole. I wanted somehow to recapture that past and help both Mormons and non-Mormons to achieve a more constructive understanding of this remarkable Latter-day Saint effort to restructure relations between men and women.

II

DESPITE the great achievements of Mormon historical studies over the past two decades, many Latter-day Saints nevertheless have remained fearful of realistic writing about the Mormon past or attempts to deal seriously with controversial issues such as polygamy. The repeatedly-expressed anxiety is that such an open and honest approach might not be "faith promoting," that it might tend to raise questions which would cause Latter-day Saints to be less loyal to their church. As a result of such fears, the last few years have seen an increasing drive from some factions of the Church to restrict or even put a stop to serious historical studies of Mormonism. Leaders of the Church are now calling publicly for their historians to write only sanitized, saccharine accounts, treatments which would best be characterized as "propaganda" by an objective observer. Never in the past decade has the outlook for the serious writing of Mormon history appeared so grim.

I am convinced that this restrictive tendency can only be counterproductive. The writing of misleading yet supposedly "positive" accounts of the Mormon past will

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contemporary religions, has refused to accept a religious-secular dichotomy at all. Mormon theology unequivocally states that the spiritual dimension is comprised of a form of matter, too, and presumably must also be subject to some form of natural law, if only we could understand it. Joseph Smith asserted: "All spirit is matter, but it is more refined and pure, and can only be discerned by purer eyes." "Spirit is a substance that is material but that is more pure and elastic and refined matter than the body . . . It existed before the body, can exist in the body, and will exist separate from the body when the body will be mouldering in the dust."

Growing out of this assertion is the Mormon belief that when properly sealed under Church authority, earthly relationships will literally continue and develop further in the afterlife and for all eternity. Death then is only a transition to a higher realm of reality which nevertheless involves a type of physical order, even though we normally cannot comprehend that order because of our earthly limitations. (The analogy



presented in Edwin Abbott's *Flatland* would be useful here.) Moreover, because this life and the afterlife are believed to be indissolubly linked, it also follows that in the last analysis all religious and secular activities on earth ideally should be inseparable. The extraordinary Mormon effort to set up their Zion in the American West during the nineteenth century reflected this drive to integrate all reality into a unitary whole. In short, Mormonism paradoxically is the most overtly materialistic of all the major offshoots of the Christian

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tradition, yet at the same time it also emphatically affirms the reality of the spiritual dimension of life. Mormons might thus be said to believe in a form of "spiritual materialism."

This explicitly materialistic orientation has some important logical consequences for Mormons studying their own history. Naive Saints, of course, will undoubtedly continue to look upon the events of their past as having happened due to unaccountable divine fiat, just as young children believe literally in Santa Claus. More mature Saints, however, have the important option of investigating even the seemingly miraculous and inexplicable elements of their history to try to understand their naturalistic dynamics, insofar as that is possible. Such investigation need not reduce the sense of awe, mystery, and power in Mormonism. To take a somewhat different example, is it really more religiously inspiring to believe that storks bring babies than to try to understand at a deeper level the extraordinary richness and complexity of the emotional and physical elements that contribute to the birth of new life and its unfolding? Anyone who has ever read widely among the great writers in the natural sciences such as Loren Eiseley is surely aware that deeper understanding heightens rather than reduces our sensitivity to the ultimate wonder that is life. Similarly, human history itself, when understood deeply and fully, is an ever-unfolding miracle. Not ignorance but knowledge is ultimately the most effective in promoting a rich and vital faith. As Mormons would say: "The glory of God is intelligence."

The writing of good history is also necessary if the Mormon church is to deal constructively with the new challenges it faces. Since the end of World War II, the Latter-day Saints have entered a new period of crisis and transition brought about, somewhat paradoxically, by their very success in attracting new members. The fourfold Mormon growth to nearly five million

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members and the spread of that membership out of the intermountain West and into other parts of the United States and the world is already requiring significant institutional changes. The long-range intellectual changes will eventually be even more profound, however, probably greater than those which took place in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. At that time, Mormonism gave up polygamy and most of its political exclusivity in order to reach at least a working accommodation with American society as a whole. If Mormonism is successfully to reach out into the world in the latter part of the twentieth century, it must also eventually shed many of its parochialisms. As only one example, the remarkable Mormon success in Brazil, where limiting membership due to racial antecedents ultimately proved too complex to be practical, contributed significantly to the decision finally to eliminate the policy of excluding blacks of African descent from full participation in the Church.

In this as in similar cases, historians and other intellectuals may play a crucial role in articulating the need for change and providing the evidence that may encourage and support the leadership in making necessary change. On the particular issue of race, the new policy itself may well have come about primarily because of the institutional demands of the Church, but without the often unpopular writings of the historians to prepare the way, elimination of this damaging and morally indefensible policy might have taken much longer than it did. In the future, similar issues will undoubtedly arise. Historians and intellectuals, both inside and outside the Church, will continue to be needed because of the broader and more realistic perspectives they can provide on both past and present. As a non-Mormon historian, I shall watch with great interest as the Latter-day Saint movement continues to struggle to come to terms with itself and with the challenges of an ever-changing society. Much has already been accomplished in the writing of Mormon history, but much more remains to be done if Mormon historians are to help successfully in spanning the gap between the still insular confines of Mormonism and the larger world.

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