

REVIEWS

FIFTY IMPORTANT MORMON BOOKS

By Curt Bench



A list of the books which have had a significant influence on the development of Mormon history, theology, and literature

THE IDEA OF DECIDING WHICH Mormon books are important is perhaps presumptuous, certainly difficult, but I hope useful. By important, I generally mean the work has had significant impact on or a major contribution in one of the five specific categories described below. "Important" does not necessarily mean best or the most well-written book nor the most informative or most inspiring. The books on this list have all had a significant influence on Mormon culture or the LDS church. Many have had a great effect on the development of Mormon historiography, the-

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ology, or literature over a sustained period of time.

To be included on this list of fifty each work had to be a book (or set of books) or pamphlet published between 1830 and 1980—the first 150 years of the Church. It is too early to measure the influence of a work printed in the last decade. We need the distance and added perspective that time, careful reflection, and judgment afford those individuals who ultimately decide—those who are affected by the work. Besides, 150 years is a nice round number.

The author of the work did not have to be LDS, but the item itself had to be generally concerned with Mormonism as it relates specifically to The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and no other groups or churches.

Because of the great number of Church magazines and other periodicals and the variety of authors and subject matter they contain, they are not included on the list. This does not diminish the importance of such periodicals as *The Evening and the Morning Star*, *The Millennial Star*, *Times and Seasons*, *The Journal of Discourses*, *The Seer*, *The Juvenile Instructor*, *The Improvement Era*, *The Relief Society Magazine*, *The Ensign*, and the independent publications of recent decades: *BYU Studies*, *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought*, and *SUNSTONE*.

Conspicuously absent from the list are the all-time most important and influential works—the LDS Standard Works: The Bible, The Book of Mormon, the Doctrine and Covenants, and The Pearl of Great Price, (including the Book of Commandments and the Joseph Smith Translation of the Bible).

I have tried to be as objective as possible in my selections by seriously considering (where known) such criteria as (1) number of titles and editions of those titles by given authors, (2) approximate sales figures, (3) area of distribution, (4) size of the Church or other population at the time of publication, (5) use of authors' materials within the Church, (6) amount of reference to those authors' works by others both in and out of the Church, and (7) the amount of time books have remained in print and demand for them when "out of print." But such data are often difficult to gather, and I have not attempted an exhaustive study.

To help create this list, I wrote to thirty-eight people who have distinguished themselves in Mormon history or literature. I received and tabulated twenty-one responses, and their consensus is reflected in the list, but the selection process was subjective and ultimately mine.

I have divided the fifty books into five categories and I will briefly discuss and elaborate on a few of the titles in each category. Entries are arranged chronologically (not ranked in importance) and are referenced to their number on the complete list.

HISTORY AND BIOGRAPHY

THESE works have made significant impact and an important contribution to the study of Mormon history and the lives of Latter-day Saints.

Biographical Sketches of Joseph Smith and His Progenitors . . . (#1) by Lucy [Mack] Smith, Joseph Smith's mother, 1853. Lucy Mack Smith's dictated memoirs were published by Orson Pratt in Liverpool in 1853. However,

according to Peter Crawley and David Whitaker, authors of *Mormon Imprints in Great Britain and The Empire, 1836-1857*,

Brigham Young objected to *Biographical Sketches* on the grounds that it contained too many significant errors and a large part of the edition . . . was ultimately destroyed. It seems clear that equally irritating to Brigham Young was Lucy Smith's favorable treatment of William Smith who had become an outspoken opponent of the Utah Church. Despite a small number of minor errors, Lucy Smith's history—the first Mormon biography—remains an invaluable source for the life of Joseph Smith.¹

This book has since been revised twice and is in print under the title *History of Joseph Smith by His Mother*.

Essentials in Church History (#4) by Joseph Fielding Smith, 1922. This polemical history was written by the Church historian and member of the Council of the Twelve in an era when memories of public denunciation of the Church were fresh. It was a time of verbal and written attack and counter-attack. There were few friendly histories written by or about Mormons. There was no one-volume Church history for use by members. Elder Smith produced this volume in 1922 and painted a very positive picture of the Restored Church and a very dark one of apostates who left the fold and gentiles who persecuted the Saints. What the book lacks in historical accuracy and objectivity, it makes up for in fervor and longevity. This book, which has gone through many editions, was used extensively for over fifty years in various Church settings such as Melchizedek priesthood quorums, seminaries, and institutes, and was required reading for all missionaries for many years. One may dispute the book's value as an accurate Church history text, but one cannot discount the influence it had on Mormon historiography and on several generations of Mormons.

No Man Knows My History (#7) by Fawn Brodie, 1945. One respondent to my questionnaire suggested this be placed in the "Anti-Mormon" category. I'm sure many, if not most, in the Church would concur. The respondents, however, largely agreed that it's one of the most important books in Church history and biography. Kent Walgren, who produced an "important book" list of his own—"The Scallawagiana Hundred"—says "Whatever one's opinion of the merits of *No Man Knows*

My History, it is probably the most influential book printed about the Mormons in this century."²

Robert Flanders calls Brodie's work "a recognized standard work on Mormon origins and early history" and says in that respect it is "unparalleled in the field, and may remain so for some time, a guide to those who undertake less ambitious studies." However, he faults her for her own "anti-Mormon intellectual orientation" and "zeal to create the grand and ultimate exposé of Mormonism."³

For good or ill, Brodie's book has had an enormous and widespread impact on the perception of Joseph Smith and Mormonism within and without the Church. Published by a prominent national publishing house, the book has enjoyed brisk sales for nearly fifty years; remarkably, it is still in print and still only in a hardbound edition. Most people who know of any book about Joseph Smith know about this one.

Great Basin Kingdom (#9) by Leonard Arrington, 1958. This scholarly and objective treatment of Church history from its inception to 1900 was written by the man Davis Bitton called "the single most important Mormon historian of his generation."⁴ A scholar in economic history, Arrington expanded numerous articles and his dissertation and produced *Great Basin Kingdom*, the first substantive examination of the relationship between the Church's religious and secular concerns. Historian James B. Allen calls the book a "model of both thoroughness and scholarly integrity" and says Arrington "added a dimension to Mormon history that could never again be ignored or dismissed by those who would take that history seriously."⁵

In this book, Arrington set a new standard in Mormon historiography, one which has had enormous impact in that field. He has influenced new generations of historians and readers of Mormon history, including myself.

DOCTRINE AND THEOLOGY

THESE works have made a notable and lasting impact on the development and expression of Mormon doctrine, theology, beliefs, and thought.

Key to the Science of Theology (#16) by Parley P. Pratt, 1855. Few writers in the Church have had the long-term impact and popularity that Pratt has had. This book, which has gone through several editions—with changes being made by people other than Pratt, such as Apostle Charles Penrose—

has usually been in print during its 130 year life. In their fine bibliographic work, *A Mormon Fifty*, Peter Crawley and Chad Flake describe this "masterly work" as "Mormonism's earliest comprehensive syncretical work," saying "its scope is complete."⁶ They point out that it must have appealed to Brigham Young, for during the twenty-two years after it was published, a time when virtually no other LDS books were being printed, *Key to the Science of Theology* went through three additional editions.

The Articles of Faith (#19) by James E. Talmage, 1899. This book is an expansive treatise on the Articles of Faith—probably the nearest thing to a Mormon creed we have. Historian Thomas Alexander wrote, "The impact of *The Articles of Faith* on doctrinal exposition within the Church was enormous."⁷

B. H. Roberts and John A. Widtsoe also added several very significant doctrinal treatises which explored many theological areas in greater detail and with more authority than had generally been done before. I have featured Elder Roberts's *Seventy's Course in Theology* (#20), a series of five Seventy's Quorum manuals that were widely studied, and *The Gospel: An Exposition of its First Principles* (#18) which went through a number of editions. Elder Widtsoe's Melchizedek priesthood manuals *Rational Theology* (#23) and *Priesthood and Church Government* are included in the list.

A Marvelous Work and a Wonder (#27) by LeGrand Richards, 1950. If for nothing else, this book must be on the list for the countless copies printed and read. Many hundreds of thousands of copies have been sold, given away, and read by Mormons and non-Mormons. It has influenced countless conversions to the Church and is probably second only to the Book of Mormon in terms of copies distributed for missionary purposes.

The book, which contains a fervent evangelical testimony and a very basic description of the Restored Church and gospel principles, has been enormously popular with Church members.

One reason for its wide distribution has been its inexpensive price. Elder Richards had a contractual agreement with the publisher, Deseret Book, that as long as he lived the price would never exceed \$1.95. True to the agreement, during Elder Richard's long life Deseret Book sold countless thousands of books at \$1.95 or less, sometimes at a loss. After the author died, the price was raised to a modest \$4.95.

Mormon Doctrine (#31) by Bruce R. McConkie, 1958. By any standard, this is a landmark book. Never before has a book authored by any Mormon, especially a general authority, covered so many gospel topics in so much detail and with so much authoritative-ness and specificity. Besides the standard works, there are few, if any, books that have been referred to or quoted as often. For the past thirty years when an average Church member wanted to research any subject, however obscure or well-known, he or she turned to the encyclopedic *Mormon Doctrine*. Despite the author's obligatory assumption of "full and sole responsibility" for the contents of the book, thereby disclaiming any official Church authorization or connection, many Saints nevertheless use it as if it were the fifth standard work.

Given the enormous popularity and voluminous sales of the book, it seems ironic that reportedly the first edition was found by Church leaders to have many doctrinal errors and, apparently, it was decided that since the book was not authoritative or approved it would not be republished. However, eight years later, in 1966, a second edition appeared wherein Elder McConkie declared in the

preface, "experience has shown the wisdom of making some changes, clarifications, and additions."⁸

LITERATURE

THIS category includes fiction and poetry that have had significant impact on Mormon readers and lasting influence on Mormon letters.

This was by far the most difficult category to fill given the dearth of great literature in the Church. For various reasons, none of them clear, we have not produced many distinguished writers. But those we have had, have added to a small but growing body of Mormon letters.

The vast majority of survey responses gave enthusiastic approval to the selection of the works by Eliza Snow, Maurine Whipple, and Virginia Sorensen. They conceded that although Nephi Anderson's *Added Upon* (#35) is not an overly well-written book, it has enjoyed enormous popularity and wide readership for ninety years. Of course, we realize today that we may have Nephi Anderson and his *Added Upon* to thank for giving us *Saturday's Warrior*.

One respondent recommended including the hymnal (#33) (I'm counting as one entry all the various editions), which she says is "the most important poetry in the Church." It, of course, contains the works of such noted Mormon poets as Parley P. Pratt, William W. Phelps, Charles Penrose, Eliza R. Snow, and many others less well known. It would be difficult to measure the vast impact and influence the hymns have had on the membership of the Church. Put to music, much of this poetry has had a sublime and unifying influence on countless numbers of Mormons.

Vardis Fisher's *Children of God* (#36) is the best known Mormon novel outside the Church. It was the 1939 Harper Prize novel and sold well, achieving much critical acclaim. In an excellent survey of "Mormon storytellers" in 1946, Dale Morgan said Fisher's book was not "front-rank" but "will remain as a formidable barrier in its field to anything except a really front-rank novel."⁹

Morgan wrote that Maurine Whipple's *The Giant Joshua* (#37) "has claims to be considered the best Mormon novel so far published. . . ." He calls it "a law unto itself" and says the book "overflows with life" and is "richly rewarding."¹⁰ Later critics tend to

FIFTY IMPORTANT MORMON BOOKS

(Arranged chronologically within each category)

HISTORY AND BIOGRAPHY

1. Lucy [Mack] Smith. *Biographical Sketches of Joseph Smith the Prophet, and His Progenitors for Many Generations*. Liverpool: S.W. Richards, 1853.
2. Parley P. Pratt. *The Autobiography of Parley Parker Pratt, One of the Twelve Apostles of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*. New York: Russell Brothers, 1874.
3. Joseph Smith. *History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, Brigham H. Roberts, ed., 7 vols. Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1902-1932.
4. Joseph Fielding Smith. *Essentials in Church History*. Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1922.
5. B.H. Roberts. *A Comprehensive History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Century I*, 6 vols. Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1930.
6. John Henry Evans. *Joseph Smith, An American Prophet*. New York: Macmillan Company, 1933.
7. Fawn M. Brodie. *No Man Knows My History: The Life of Joseph Smith, the Mormon Prophet*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1945.
8. Juanita Brooks. *The Mountain Meadows Massacre*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1950.
9. Leonard J. Arrington. *Great Basin Kingdom: An Economic History of the Latter-day Saints, 1830-1900*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1958.
10. James B. Allen and Glen M. Leonard. *The Story of the Latter-day Saints*. Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Co., 1976.
11. Edward L. Kimball and Andrew E. Kimball, Jr. *Spencer W. Kimball*. Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1977.
12. Parley P. Pratt. *A Voice of Warning and Instruction to All People, Containing a Declaration of the Faith and Doctrine of the Church of the Latter-day Saints, Commonly Called Mormons*. New York: W. Sandford, 1837.
13. Orson Spencer. *Letters Exhibiting the Most Prominent Doctrines of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*. Liverpool: Orson Spencer, 1848.
14. Orson Pratt. *A Series of Pamphlets, by Orson Pratt*. Liverpool: R. James, 1851.
15. John Jaques. *Catechism for Children, Exhibiting the Prominent Doctrines of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*. Liverpool: F.D. Richards, 1854.
16. Parley P. Pratt. *Key to the Science of Theology*. Liverpool: F.D. Richards, 1855.
17. Franklin D. Richards. *A Compendium of the Faith and Doctrines of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*. Liverpool: Orson Pratt, 1857.
18. B.H. Roberts. *The Gospel: An Exposition of Its First Principles*. Salt Lake City: The Contributor Company, 1888.
19. James E. Talmage. *The Articles of Faith*. Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1899.
20. B.H. Roberts. *The Seventy's Course in Theology*, 5 vols. Salt Lake City: Deseret News, 1907-1912.
21. James E. Talmage. *Jesus the Christ*. Salt

agree with Morgan. In fact, this seems to be the unanimous choice of all I asked to name the best Mormon novel.

Equally well loved and certainly more prolific is Virginia Sorenson. Many respondents selected her *Where Nothing Is Long Ago* (#38) as her best book, with *The Evening and the Morning* as a close second. Though most of Sorenson's books are out of print, her work is still being studied and enjoyed today by many of her fans.

ANTI-MORMON BOOKS

THESE books have had the most significant and lasting impact on the negative perception of Mormonism.

Mormonism Unveiled [sic] (#39) by Eber D. Howe, 1834. This must be recognized as the most significant and widely known attack on Joseph Smith and Mormonism. It is the father of anti-Mormon books, most of which knowingly or unknowingly draw from its arguments and polemics. This widely distributed work greatly damaged the image of the early Church and caused Joseph Smith no end of grief.

The History of the Saints or an Exposé of Joe

- City: Published by the Church, 1915.
22. Joseph F. Smith. *Gospel Doctrine*. Salt Lake City: The Deseret News, 1919.
 23. John A. Widtsoe. *Rational Theology: As Taught by the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*. Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1915.
 24. John A. Widtsoe. *Priesthood and Church Government*. Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Co., 1936.
 25. Joseph Smith. *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*. Joseph Fielding Smith, ed. Salt Lake City: Deseret News Press, 1938.
 26. John A. Widtsoe. *Evidences and Reconciliations*, 3 vols. Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1943, 1947, 1951.
 27. LeGrand Richards. *A Marvelous Work and a Wonder*. Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Co., 1950.
 28. Joseph Fielding Smith. *Man: His Origin and Destiny*. Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Co., 1954.
 29. Joseph Fielding Smith. *Doctrines of Salvation*, 3 vols. Bruce R. McConkie, ed. Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1954-1956.
 30. Joseph Fielding Smith. *Answers to Gospel Questions*, 5 vols. Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Co., 1957-1966.
 31. Bruce R. McConkie. *Mormon Doctrine*. Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1958.

Smith and Mormonism (#40) by John C. Bennett, 1842. This devastating book was the first by such a high-ranking insider. Bennett had been Joseph Smith's close confidant and occupied several significant positions in the Church and in the city of Nauvoo. Bennett's book included a sensational exposé of polygamy and contained many other emotionally charged accusations of wrong-doing. After Bennett's lurid attack, anti-Mormon feelings reached a fever pitch, and two years later Joseph Smith was killed.

BOOKS BY SYMPATHETIC NON-MORMON AUTHORS

THESE are significant books written about the Mormons by authors who were not hostile to the Church and who were widely read. There have been several prominent authors in this category both in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries; six are included in the list.

Richard F. Burton was a world-famous English explorer and author among other esteemed professions. Like many authors who traveled widely, he visited several places in America including Salt Lake City. Fawn Brodie, Burton's biographer, said the "flour-

ishing Mormon Zion" in Utah drew him "like a magnet . . . and the resulting *City of the Saints* (#47) was the best book on the Mormons published during the nineteenth century." He "looked at everything with a friendly and generally unprejudiced eye."¹¹ His sympathetic treatment of the polygamous Mormons stood in stark contrast to the usual caustic treatment they had received in the nation's press and literature.

Wallace Stegner is one of the most distinguished Western American authors. He has written warmly, though not totally uncritically, about the Mormons in several works. He spent his teen and college years in Utah and once said that "if I have a home town, a place where my heart is, it is Salt Lake City."¹² In 1964 Stegner's excellent treatment of the Mormon exodus to Utah, *The Gathering of Zion* (#50) and *Mormon Country*, are critically acclaimed and are still in print today. This list is limited and arbitrary and cannot be considered the final word, but I think it can be argued that the books therein had significant impact on countless members and nonmembers of the Church and represent a valuable cross section of Mormon studies and literature.

32. Spencer W. Kimball. *The Miracle of Forgiveness*. Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1969.

LITERATURE

33. *Hymns*. Various editions from 1835 on.
34. Eliza R. Snow. *Poems, Religious, Historical, and Political*, 2 vols. Vol. 1, Liverpool: F.D. Richards, 1856. Vol. 2, Salt Lake City: Latter-day Saints' Printing and Publishing Establishments, 1877.
35. Nephi Anderson. *Added Upon. A Story*. Salt Lake City: Deseret News Publishing Company, 1898.
36. Vardis Fisher. *Children of God: An American Epic*. New York: Harper and Brothers, 1939.
37. Maurine Whipple. *The Giant Joshua*. Boston: Houghton-Mifflin Co., 1941.
38. Virginia Sorenson. *Where Nothing is Long Ago*. New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1963.

ANTI-MORMON

39. Eber D. Howe. *Mormonism Unveiled*. [sic] Painesville: Printed and Published by the Author, 1834.
40. John C. Bennett. *The History of the Saints: or An exposé of Joe Smith and Mormonism*. Boston: Leland and Whiting, 1842.

41. Maria Ward (pseud.). *Female Life Among the Mormons*. London: C.H. Clarke, 1855.
42. Mrs. T.B.H. Stenhouse. *Tell it All*. Hartford, Conn.: A.D. Worthington and Co., 1874.
43. Ann Eliza Young. *Wife No. 19*. Hartford: Dustin, Gilman & Co., 1875.
44. Sandra and Jerald Tanner. *Mormonism: Shadow or Reality?* Salt Lake City: Modern Microfilm Co., 1964.

BOOKS BY SYMPATHETIC NON-MORMON AUTHORS

45. Thomas Leiper Kane. *The Mormons*. Philadelphia: King and Baird, Printers, 1850.
46. John W. Gunnison. *The Mormons, or, Latter-day Saints*. Philadelphia: Lippincott, Grambo & Co, 1852.
47. Richard F. Burton. *The City of the Saints, and Across the Rocky Mountains to California*. London: Longman, Green, Longman, and Roberts, 1861.
48. Hubert Howe Bancroft. *History of Utah. 1540-1886*. San Francisco: The History Company, 1889.
49. Thomas F. O'Dea. *The Mormons*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1957.
50. Wallace Stegner. *The Gathering of Zion: The Story of the Mormon Trail*. New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1964.

NOTES

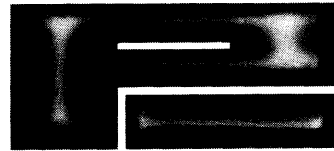
1. Peter Crawley and David J. Whittaker, *Mormon Imprints in Great Britain and the Empire, 1836-1857* (Provo: Friends of the Brigham Young University Library, 1987), 59-60.
2. Kent L. Walgren, *The Scallawagiana Hundred: A Selection of the Hundred Most Important Books about the Mormons and Utah* (Salt Lake City: Scallawagiana Books, 1982), 7.
3. Robert Bruce Flanders, "Writing on the Mormon Past," *Dialogue* 1 (Autumn 1966): 58.
4. Davis Bitton and Maureen Ursenbach Beecher, *New Views of Mormon History: Essays in Honor of Leonard J. Arrington* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1987), vii.
5. Bitton and Beecher, 415.
6. Peter Crawley and Chad J. Flake, *A Mormon Fifty* (Provo: Friends of the Brigham Young University Library, 1984), item #45.
7. Thomas G. Alexander, "The Reconstruction of Mormon Doctrine," in *Line Upon Line: Essays on Mormon Doctrine* ed. Gary James Bergera (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1989), 60.
8. Bruce R. McConkie, *Mormon Doctrine* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1966), preface.
9. Dale L. Morgan, "Mormon Storytellers," in *The Rocky Mountain Reader*, ed. Ray B. West, Jr. (New York: E.P. Dutton & Co., Inc., 1946), 409-410.
10. Morgan, 410.
11. Richard F. Burton, *The City of the Saints and Across the Rocky Mountains to California*, ed. Fawn M. Brodie (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1963), vii.
12. Wallace Stegner, *The Gathering of Zion: The Story of the Mormon Trail* (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Co., 1964), 314.

WHAT MARY GOBLE PAY DID NOT SAY AT THE MOUTH
OF IMMIGRATION CANYON, DECEMBER 10, 1856

I shall take this wagon wheel as the icon for all my journeys, this sage white valley the hub of my wooden wandering and will them to you. You shall plant seven wheels in your front yard and stain them red with all-weather stain. They shall be your boundary, the iron and wood backdrop for your forsythia, your lily of the valley, your impatiens. These rusted bands will ring your walk and beckon every casual, unhearing passer-by, a rim of tough stock joined to the straight, the narrow.

I will erect a statue to chronicle my journey. Cast in bronze, heroic, it will freeze my walk—the buzzing fear the moment Momma stopped breathing but the wagon echoed on, the short words our captain spoke beyond fatigue, the fat time when I couldn't sleep the stars whispered so loud, the light dusting my eyes, the bland cake that tasted of earth, the sweet water cruel in its peace—all these things I shall freeze in a symbol and plant it there and there and there. And bid them blossom.

—SCOTT SAMUELSON



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