
REVIEWS

HOMEMAKING MEETINGS

WOMEN OF COVENANT

by Jill Mulvay Derr, Janath Russell Cannon, and

Maureen Ursenbach Beecher

Deseret Book Co., 1992, 544 pages, \$21.00

ELIZA AND HER SISTERS

by Maureen Ursenbach Beecher

Aspen Books, 1991, 166 pages + index, \$8.95



Reviewed by Jessie L. Embry

IN THE FOREWORD to *Eliza and Her Sisters*, Leonard J. Arrington declares, "We are now in the third decade of the modern women's movement, and it is clear that women have been major players in the historical events that have molded the world" (vii). Arrington then describes studies which discuss the role of women in the LDS church. Two recent histories, *Eliza and Her Sisters* and *Women of Covenant*, can now be added to that list.

Reading *Women of Covenant* reminds me of attending a Relief Society homemaking meeting. There are some things I really enjoy. It gives me an opportunity to visit with friends who usually don't have the time to chat and to occasionally learn. It also inspires me to do my visiting teaching and to care more about the sisters in my ward. But there are some things that are always missing. While tough issues are occasionally raised, there never seem to be any solid answers. And most of the time is spent doing craft projects that I never finish.

For me, *Women of Covenant* has all the positive elements of a homemaking meeting. I learned about "old friends," the general presidents of the Relief Society. While I have studied the life of Emmeline B. Wells, I knew

almost nothing about Louise Y. Robison. I was introduced to women on the ward and stake level whom I have never studied. I was especially impressed with the stories of women from throughout the world, and how all these women throughout time and place have used our shared beliefs to cope with their struggles. Since I have researched Relief Society history myself, I expected much of the book to review familiar stories. I was pleasantly surprised. For example, while I can recite the history of the Cottonwood Maternity Hospital, I knew very little about the Snowflake Hospital. Because the book taught me some new things, refreshed my memory on others, and showed the spiritual strength of Relief Society women, I applaud the authors.

I also appreciate the authors for writing a religious history of faith. The Museum of Church History and Art entitled its main exhibit on the history of the Church "Covenant Restored." The display focuses on the covenants that members make with God and explains that these covenants can be seen in all aspects of Church history. *Women of Covenant* takes the same approach. The authors show how women have made covenants with God and how those promises are reflected in their daily activities in the Relief Society. Like the women who attend my homemaking meeting, bring dinners to sick members of the ward, and visit teach me in my home when they have many other things they

could be doing, the women in this book are willing to perform tasks because they agree with the Savior's counsel that service to others is service to him. Like a homemaking meeting, the book inspires me to be of greater assistance.

Yet, also like a Relief Society homemaking meeting, I left *Women of Covenant* feeling that most of the difficult questions had not been answered, the project had not been completed. Although the authors acknowledge some of the difficult problems of women and the Church, like a fruit salad, the apples' sharp edges are covered with whipped cream. An example is the Relief Society grain storage program. As the authors point out, the women started saving wheat when Brigham Young gave the assignment to President Emmeline B. Wells in 1876. From then until President Barbara B. Smith turned the wheat over to the Welfare Committee in 1979, the Relief Society claimed ownership of the project. But the women could only watch as they gradually lost power. From total responsibility where not even the president of the Church could ask for the grain without the sisters' permission, the Relief Society saw their control slip until they were told to counsel with a ward bishop on how the grain should be used. Finally, the Presiding Bishopric sold the grain during World War I without first consulting General Relief Society President Emmeline B. Wells. The Relief Society did not replace the grain; the interest on the monies from the sale was used to support maternity and infant care until the principal was used to purchase wheat again as part of the welfare program of the 1930s. The wheat was still nominally the Relief Society's until President Barbara Smith turned over the remaining control to President Kimball in 1979.

Although this is a familiar and oft-told story by LDS women historians, unfortunately the telling of the story is scattered throughout this book, so it is difficult to see how one event led to another. Yet the entire story is a classic example of how Relief Society authority shifted from the women to ward bishops and the Presiding Bishopric. Looking at the events in isolation from the gradual loss of power that had occurred earlier obscures the complete picture.

For me, the entire history of the Relief Society is a story of a loss of power. The earliest loss came when Emma Smith attempted to use the organization to argue against plural marriage; as a result the Society was disbanded. When Relief Society was started again in 1867, the women had their own meeting buildings, their own magazines

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(the *Women's Exponent* and the *Relief Society Magazine*), and their own programs (in addition to grain storage, the women had a genealogical program, bazaars, and an independent budget, just to name a few). As the Church grew and "correlation" programs were developed to administer to a larger membership, the Relief Society gradually lost control of its own destiny. The Genealogical Society, for example, took over from the women a *Deseret News* column, an index card program, and much of the teaching work. The separate *Relief Society Magazine* was replaced with a yearly women's issue and then a few pages in the *Ensign*. A room in the meetinghouse replaced the Relief Society buildings; their budget was absorbed by the ward. Like the grain storage programs, this loss of power was gradual and part of a larger plan to bring the auxiliaries under priesthood direction. While the Sunday School and the Young Men's Mutual Improvement Association also lost power with the reorganization, the men who directed those programs still maintained priesthood authority. Only women's organizations lost all sense of power.

While this story is gloomier than the authors wanted to present, understanding this loss of control is an essential element to understanding Relief Society history. Many of these facts are presented, but they are not tied together. Therefore, like my homemaking projects, the craft of historical interpretation was never completed in this book.

But did I expect answers to these tough questions in this book? Realistically, no. The authors are aware of the concerns and have dealt with them in other forums, but I didn't expect to find them openly dealt with in a *Deseret Book* publication for the general Church. To understand the complete history of Relief Society, we need to look beyond the "official statements" to the "alternate voices" (just as to see the concerns of LDS women we must look beyond the official Relief Society meetings to informal gatherings). *Women of Covenant*, like Relief Society, will be the standard for women in the Church; unfortunately, it does not provide the vital explanations we need to learn from the past.

ELIZA AND HER SISTERS, a collection of previously published essays on Eliza R. Snow by Maureen Ursenbach Beecher, also reminds me of homemaking meetings. Once again, there is a special spirit in the book. Sister Snow does "come to life" as the summary on the back of the book suggests. With carefully crafted prose, Beecher shares her insights on Snow as a "poetess, prophetess,

priestess, and presidentess." Just as I leave homemaking meetings feeling a new closeness to the women who were there, when I finished this book I felt a fresh kinship with Snow and some of her early associations. Although I had read all of the articles earlier, having them placed together provided new insights. I especially admire the concluding chapter which looks at the informal power of the early Mormon "leading sisters" and honestly concludes that just as there was a male power structure in Utah that was connected by kinship ties there was also a female elite who dictated the women's organizations and roles in the Church.

Yet there are also elements of what I dislike about homemaking meetings in this book as well. Because the book consists of essays originally published to stand on their own, just as in homemaking meetings there is a lot of repetition. And while the author adapts some of the latest in feminist studies in each chapter and addresses some of the difficult questions about Mormon women and power (and that is to the credit of the journals that originally published the articles and Aspen Books who put together the study), I left the discussion still feeling that the process of historic interpretation was not complete. I want to know more about why the Relief Society was disbanded in 1844 and not started again until 1867 in Utah. I crave a better understanding of the meaning of women meeting together at Winter Quarters. I want to have a better grasp of how the "leading sisters" affected the lives of the more "ordinary" Mormon women. And more than that, I want to be able to tie together all of the pieces of Snow's life mentioned in this book and see her as a complete person rather than in fragments. Beecher's complete biography of Snow should deal with this question, but for now I am stuck with disjointed pieces. Like homemaking meetings which look at a different topic each month and the only thread is the same women in attendance, *Eliza and Her Sisters* only barely holds together because Snow is in all of the chapters.

Women of Covenant and *Eliza and Her Sisters* are both attempts to look honestly at the role of women in the Mormon church. However, it will take future studies to fully discover that. These future books and articles will have to be willing to pose hard questions and accept unpleasant and uncomfortable answers. Until then our studies of Mormon women, like Relief Society homemaking meetings, will remain delightful gatherings of love and friendship in a safe comfort zone, but provide no real guidelines to help women deal with their daily lives. ☐

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A SPOKESPERSON FOR THE NEW "LOST GENERATION"

HOW I GOT CULTURED: A NEVADA MEMOIR

By Phyllis Barber

The University of Georgia Press, 1992

189 pages, cloth, \$24.95



Reviewed by Margaret Young

I FIRST MET Phyllis Barber at a Sunstone Symposium where we were doing readings—she from her novel *And The Desert Shall Blossom* and I from *Salvador*. Both of us had agents representing our work and high hopes of national publication. However, both of us ended up publishing with good—but nonetheless limited—regional presses (Phyllis with the University of Utah Press and I with Aspen). She heard from the “big” publishers essentially the same thing I did: “Good work, but inaccessible to our audience.”

Perhaps what excites me most about Barber's novel, *How I Got Cultured*, is that it comes pre-decorated as the winner of the prestigious Associated Writing Programs award for creative non-fiction and is published by the University of Georgia Press—far, far away from Utah. This signals that once again writers coming from, and unashamedly writing about, Mormon beginnings may indeed become “accessible” to a national audience—something that happened decades ago with the so-called lost generation: Virginia Sorensen, Vardis Fisher, and Maurine Whipple.

Phyllis has done it. She has made her Mormon “culture” very accessible, not only because of her obvious love and command of language, her humorous, painfully honest accounts of growing up as the bishop's daughter in the Nevada desert, but because she presents her Mormonism from the context of her own life, a life so realistically described and its episodes so familiar that they surely must have resonated even to typesetters in Georgia.

MARGARET YOUNG'S latest book, *Elegies and Love Songs* recently won the Association for Mormon Letters award for short fiction.

She relates the Joseph Smith story as she heard it in Primary class, complete with children echoing demands to know why the Holy Ghost isn't pictured in the visual aid, and the teacher assuring them that, though the Holy Ghost has no body and is therefore invisible, he isn't like the scary ghosts big kids talk about. She describes ward talent night, where “A Spanish dancing costume [hung] from a nail where a picture of Joseph Smith receiving his vision hung on Sundays.” She describes a ward dinner: “We had to pray over the food on our buffet table before we scooped and plucked and mathematically figured out how to fill a plate to capacity.” And she shows Mormon doctrine from a child's perspective: “Being a good Mormon was the most important thing anyone could ever think of doing, and everything on earth was only transient, sandwiched between the pre-existence and the hereafter.”

Barber details how she got “cultured” in the Mormon faith. And her sometimes mystical experiences with the outside “culture”—both the raucous Las Vegas culture of dance and barroom cowboys, and the artistic “culture” personified by Leonard Bernstein—are evocative and all the more poignant when juxtaposed with her religious growth and/or captivity.

There is another possible interpretation of the word “cultured” in her title—whether she intended it or not. I'm thinking of “cultured” buttermilk or yogurt, the “culture” as a souring agent: Barber tells her story from close-up, yet sourfully far away. Though Phyllis Barber may be the spokesperson for the new “lost generation” of Mormon writers, even when she seems to patronize Mormons just a little in writing about her past, she shows a deep fondness

underlying her prose. She even tells us that the Holy Ghost once spoke to her, assuring her he loved her and would show her the way. The Holy Ghost, it seems, was very much a part of her coming of age.

How I Got Cultured is a break-through book. It begins to present the full Mormon picture—neither caricatured nor idealized—that we Mormon writers *must* present if we are to firmly establish ourselves in the borderless literary canon. And Phyllis Barber is an ideal writer to do this for us. She is herself a literary explosion, something like the nuclear bomb test cloud she describes in her book, a cloud that “flowered, mushroomed, turned itself inside out, and poured into the sky.”

And could be seen, I might add, from miles away. ☐

BOOKNOTE

IMAGINATION COMES TO BREAKFAST

Signature Books, 1992, 60 pages, \$9.95

Poems by Kathy Evans

KATHY EVANS'S *Imagination Comes to Breakfast* is aptly named and well designed. The steaming cup and pink carnations on the cover fall into a sky where an egg cup opens into a rooster and floats away. Likewise, the poems inside surprise us like the angles of domestic life, sharp in their sudden perspectives.

“I have my own apocalypse,” the consistent “voice” in these poems tells the Jehovah's Witnesses at her door. “The soup bones in the broth are bubbling, / I hear spiders in the cupboards, / and the angels shaking tambourines.”

Indeed, in the organic way such women create homes, Evans evolves a world of mystery teeming just below the dust left by heavy traffic. Poems of love, tedium, tension, and joy intermix, and both genders are welcome here.

“If you were infinite, I would / count you anyway, and if I were the color of fire, / you would be the memory of fire,” she explains in “Aggregates.”

This tall, sixty-page collection offers insightful interludes for any reader capable of wandering between breakfast and imagination. Congratulations to Signature Books, once again, for its discernment and commitment to excellent writing. ☐

—LINDA SILLITOE

A PEEK INTO CHURCH PROTOCOL

VICTIMS: THE LDS CHURCH
AND THE MARK HOFMANN CASE

By Richard E. Turley Jr.

University of Illinois Press, 1992, 519 pages, cloth, \$27.95



Reviewed by Fred C. Esplin

WELL, AS IT turns out, the Church had the McLellin collection all along—long before Mark Hofmann tried to sell it to them. But the lack of a comprehensive list of the holdings in the Church and First Presidency archives prevented anyone—including the Church archivist or the First Presidency—from knowing it.

That's perhaps the most interesting of many insights provided by the latest book on the tragedy wrought by Hofmann. Another is the most complete accounting available of Hofmann documents acquired by the Church (in the appendix).

Richard Turley is the managing director of the LDS Church Historical Department and *Victims* is his attempt to give the Church's side of the story. As Turley unabashedly explains in his preface, he had two purposes in mind in writing the book: first, to tell the story from the Church's point of view; and second, to set the record straight, or, as Turley puts it, to "correct some misconceptions about the case."

"What misconceptions?" you ask. Well, that the Church was trying to buy historical documents to hide them, that the Church didn't cooperate fully with law enforcement authorities in the investigation, or that the Church had anything to be embarrassed about in the way it handled the whole matter.

Clearly, Turley had his work cut out for

him. But despite the size of the task, *Victims* is a remarkable book and an important contribution to the historical record of the whole affair.

If you're looking for an impartial, complete accounting of the Hofmann affair, this isn't the book for you—your time would be better spent reading *A Gathering of Saints* by Richard Lindsay or *Salamander* by Linda Sillitoe and Allen Roberts. But, if you've read those books (and if you haven't already wasted your time with Gregory Smith and Steven Naifeh's *Mormon Murders*, don't) and would like to round out your understanding with the Church's view, *Victims* is the book for you. Certainly it's a must for any serious scholarly study of that bleak episode in Mormon history.

Victims provides access (albeit selective) to the diaries, correspondence, and interviews with the principal general authorities involved in the case. The book is exhaustively documented and much of the more interesting details are in the footnotes (100 pages worth), some of which are devoted to "correcting" previously published sources.

Among the more revealing aspects of the book, in addition to the major contribution of offering the Church's side of the story, is some insight into the inner workings of the Church. The documentation of how a member of the First Quorum of Seventy (Elder Pinnock) relates to a member of the Quorum of the Twelve (Elder Oaks), how they, in turn, relate to a member of the First Presidency (President Hinckley), and how the Church bureaucracy relates to the general authorities, are all a study in contemporary

Church government. The respect for protocol, the deference shown to position, the assumption of unstated but assumed wishes—it's all there and lends an important understanding to how things work at Church headquarters.

You gain understanding and feel empathy for Elder Dallin Oaks as he anguishes over newspaper and TV accounts that call into question the actions and motives of the Church. But you can't help but wonder if Church criticism of inaccuracies or distortions in the press couldn't have been better dealt with at the time by providing the press more access rather than keeping them at arm's length.

You also get the feeling as you read the book that the phrase "The buck stops here" doesn't apply at Church headquarters. Regrettably, the Church is not immune from bureaucratic obfuscation.

All that said, *Victims* is an important contribution to the historical record of the Hofmann affair. It will be interesting to see how the Church chooses to deal with future, unpleasant episodes—and what balance it seeks between providing access to historians and the news media versus issuing an "official" version of events for the record. ☐

Revised second edition: For Those Who Wonder Managing Religious Questions and Doubts

by D. Jeff Burton

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