

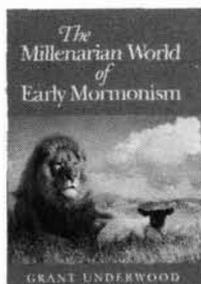
## R E V I E W S

A COURSE CORRECTION IN  
MORMON HISTORIOGRAPHY

THE MILLENARIAN WORLD  
OF EARLY MORMONISM  
by Grant Underwood  
University of Illinois Press, 1993  
204 pages, \$24.95



Reviewed by John L. Brooke



*A major contribution not only to our understanding of millennial thinking in the early LDS church but also to the broader picture of millennialism in antebellum America.*

GIVEN THAT THE LDS church announces as fundamental doctrine "the literal gathering of Israel," the building of Zion, and the future personal reign of Christ on earth (article of faith 10), the study of millennialism in Mormon history is curiously undeveloped. In a major new study, Grant Underwood seeks to remedy this situation and in doing so, challenges both older and newer understandings of the Mormon past. Underwood's book, built upon a well-respected series of articles published over the past fifteen years, is a major contribution not only to our understanding of millennial thinking in the early LDS church but also to the broader picture of millennialism in antebellum America. It will be appreciated by experts and a general audi-

JOHN L. BROOKE ([jbrooke@tufts.edu](mailto:jbrooke@tufts.edu)) is an associate professor of history at Tufts University and the author of *The Refiner's Fire: The Making of Mormon Cosmology, 1644-1844*, which won Columbia University's prestigious Bancroft Prize in American history.

ence alike.

Underwood's book stands at an interesting juncture of our understanding of millennial beliefs in the American past. For several decades, such studies occupied center stage in American religious history, enriching our understanding of the complex relationships between the sacred and secular from colonial beginnings down through the Civil War and even to the Progressive era. At the moment, the study of the millennium in American religion seems to have reached a point of exhaustion, and Underwood's study may contribute to its reinvigoration.

Two important interpretive currents have shaped and perhaps limited the analysis of millennialism in the field of Mormon history. On the one hand, the so-called "Kingdom school," led by Klaus Hansen, has focused attention on the political and economic dimensions of the forging of the Mormon Kingdom of God at Nauvoo and in Utah. On the other, a more purely doctrinal analysis has concentrated not on the millennial end times but on the theme of a Mormon restoration of the an-

cient true Church, an interpretation advanced by Mario DePillis, Marvin Hill, Jan Shipps, and many others. In an important sense, these interpretive approaches were complementary; one can argue that the Kingdom school describes the institutionalization of the restoration. But, intent on exploring the unique claims to restoration and the equally unique efforts to build a literal Kingdom of God in America, these schools of thought have deflected attention from the theology of millennialism in the Mormon tradition set against the broader Christian tradition.

It is this attention to a theology of millennialism that Underwood offers. Traditional scholarship differentiates between premillennialism and postmillennialism, two competing interpretations of scripture which (simplifying greatly) differ on whether the literal coming of Christ will come before (premillennial) or after (postmillennial) a thousand years of rule by the Saints. Much of American millennial scholarship in the past forty years has focused on the emergence of the postmillennial vision in the eighteenth century, with its implications for the rise of an optimistic concept of progress and of an American civil religion. But scholars have also charted the reemergence of a popular and "combative premillennialism" after the American Revolution, as religious democracy challenged the ruling church establishments.<sup>1</sup>

These frameworks provided the ground for several efforts to establish a synthetic view of Mormon millennialism, beginning with Ernest Tuveson's analysis in his 1968 *Redeemer Nation*, published before the restoration theme had been fully established. Faced with the complexities of the Mormon story, Tuveson and subsequent historians including Klaus Hansen and Marvin Hill split the difference, placing Mormonism on the boundary between the premillennialist imperative of an imminent apocalypse and postmillennialist construction of a progressive future.<sup>2</sup>

Grant Underwood rejects this fence-sitting, explicitly challenging Hansen and Tuveson, and defines early Mormon millennial thinking starkly and sharply as premillennial or millenarian. In his terms, "Mormon eschatology . . . exhibit[s] much closer kinship to millenarian apocalypticism than it does to allegorist postmillennialism"(8): early Mormonism was driven not primarily by restoration or Kingdom-building but by the ultimate expectation of the impending apocalypse, the literal coming of Christ, and the millennial rule of the Saints. Joseph Smith's address at the April 1834 conference at Norton, Ohio, just prior

*Early Mormonism was driven not primarily by restoration or Kingdom-building but by the ultimate expectation of impending apocalypse, the literal coming of Christ, and the millennial rule of the Saints.*

to the march of Zion's Camp to redeem the embattled Missouri settlements, illustrates Underwood's point. "Take away the Book of Mormon and the revelations, and where is our religion? We have none; for without Zion, and a place of deliverance, we must fall." Underwood's analysis is powerfully telling:

Note that the sense was not 'take away the restoration scriptures, and we shall have none of our distinctive doctrines,' but 'take away our revelations, and we shall not be able to identify Israel in America, nor locate Zion, the city of refuge.' The eschatological setting is explicit here and brings into sharp focus the fundamentally millenarian nature of the doctrine of the restoration of Israel. (67)

In Underwood's view, early Mormonism stood in expectation of the imminent end of the world, not the construction of an enduring, permanent, true church. In great measure, he is right, and in calling our attention to the apocalyptic strain in early Mormonism, Underwood has achieved a salient course correction in Mormon historiography. But given the rapidly evolving history of the early Church and the many voices surviving from that time, one has to ask *which* early Mormonism and *whose* early Mormonism we are looking at when we reexamine this world through Underwood's millenarian field of vision. And one has to wonder what the implications are if we sweep away Mormonism's claim to the progressive postmillennial tradition in favor of the premillennialist apocalypse.

Underwood's book is divided into eight chapters covering the early history of the Church into the Illinois years followed by a brief epilogue carrying his analysis into the twentieth century. His first three chapters establish his theme. Chapter 1 is a necessarily selective exploration of millennial thinking since the time of Christ, emphasizing the central place of "millenarian apocalypticism" (19) at critical moments in Christian history, particularly in its first generation and during the Radical Reformation. Here Underwood joins a growing number of historians who see antecedents to Mormonism in the radical sects of the Reformation and English Revolution. Chapters 2 and 3 describe the millenarian expectations of early Mormons, dwelling in particular on the writings of Orson Hyde, Sidney Rigdon, and Parley P. Pratt, whose 1837 *Voice of Warning* stands as the great Mormon declaration on the end times.

In chapter 3, as he does at several junctures in this study, Underwood elegantly resolves a potential contradiction to his thesis. Arguing that millenarians sharply differentiate between good and evil, saved and damned, the chosen people and a wicked world, Underwood argues convincingly that the February 1832 Vision of Three Degrees of Glory, with its graduated tiers of salvation and exaltation, was simply not assimilated by the Mormon rank-and-file until the pivotal months in Nauvoo in 1843 and 1844, when in his poetic rendition of the 1832 vision and in the King Follett sermon, "Joseph Smith began to emphasize a pluralized rather than a polarized picture of eternity" (56). This realistic approach to the selective and limited

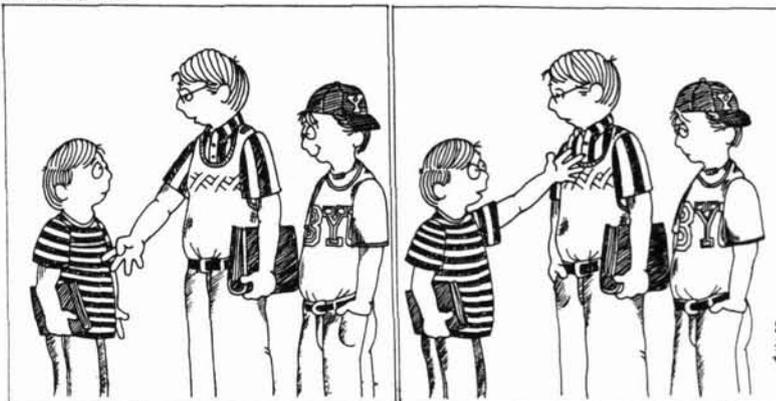
textual familiarity of ordinary early Mormons is a central feature of Underwood's fourth and fifth chapters, which explore the role of the Bible and the Book of Mormon in "reinforc[ing] a millenarian worldview" (96). A literalist reading of the Bible fueled popular Mormon expectations of the coming apocalypse, and both the Bible and the Book of Mormon were selectively mined for texts and types which spoke to a people looking to the end of the world as they knew it.

Two of Underwood's final three chapters are his most problematic, and the questions they pose raise others about his earlier chapters. Chapter 6 engages with the "Kingdom school" directly, arguing that early Mormons sought no radical changes in the nature of American society; rather than radicals, they were "moderate millenarians." Quite apart from the inherent incompatibility of apocalypticism and moderation, Underwood's moderate Mormons seem quite incapable of the theological, gender-sociological, and theocratic revolutions that most scholars see unfolding from the late 1830s, and particularly at Nauvoo in 1843–1844. Many will find this chapter unconvincing. Underwood's eighth chapter is much more useful, arguing that a trans-Atlantic premillennialism paved the way for the English conversions of the 1840s and 1850s. Here he is on solid ground and makes a real contribution.

His seventh chapter poses more complex problems. In an important, ground-breaking discussion, Underwood tackles the question of Joseph Smith's encounter with the prophecies of William Miller, the Baptist preacher who predicted in 1831 that the end of the earth would come in 1843, later changing the date to 22 October 1844. Here Underwood's thesis runs into a snag because, if Mormons and Millerites shared a fundamental premillennial belief in "the literal, personal return of Christ to inaugurate the millennium" (118), Mormons—led by their prophet—rejected the immediacy of Miller's prediction. At various points in 1843, Mormon leaders published detailed refutations of Miller's predictions, with Joseph Smith assuring his people that the end would not come until he was eighty-five, in the year 1890.

It is in Smith's retreat that Underwood finds closure on his account of early Mormon premillennialism, and begins to—implic-

NEW KID IN ZION...



MY FATHER WORKS FOR THE TWELVE...

BIG DEAL! MY DAD WORKS FOR THE 7-ELEVEN!!

itly—concede the field to his adversaries of the “Kingdom school.” In the chapter’s final paragraph, he argues that Smith’s encounter with the Millerites “appears to have helped him lay aside ideas of an imminent end. His clear and repeated denunciations of a near advent, uttered in reaction to Millerism, suggest that a permanent modification occurred in his thinking at this time” (126). Abandoning the “near advent” would seem to open the possibility of building the temporal and permanent Kingdom, but Underwood does not see fit to explore this possibility.

Of course we might well ask whether Joseph Smith really did maintain a staunchly monolithic millenarian worldview all the way until 1843. Was the Millerite encounter really so decisive? These questions drive the reader back to Underwood’s earlier chapters in search of Joseph Smith’s voice, and the re-

sult is somewhat equivocal. For example, in chapters 2 and 3, which establish the millenarian credentials of early Mormonism, Smith is rarely in evidence, and the bulk of the references are to Orson Hyde, Sidney Rigdon, and Parley P. Pratt, important men certainly, but not the prophet. At one point, Underwood cites twenty-five sections of the Doctrine and Covenants which refer to an imminent millennium; quite tellingly, eighteen of these date from the fourteen months between September 1830 and November 1831; five are scattered over more than two years, between August 1832 and November 1834; and only two date to later years, in revelations on the mission of the Twelve in 1837 and on baptism for the dead in 1842 (161 n51). Is there any relationship between the sudden drop in Smith’s use of millenarian language at the end of 1831 and his theological departure in the vision of

February 1832?<sup>3</sup> There is room for us to entertain the hypothesis that, while premillennial anticipation of the apocalypse was a powerful force in Mormonism through the 1830s, and was clearly articulated by many of the leading Mormon intellectuals, Joseph Smith was already exploring new theological departures. If—as Underwood stresses—“the controlling cosmological model for the Saints during the life of the Prophet was still profoundly shaped by millenarian apocalypticism” (56–57), the Prophet himself had long been exploring complementary yet distinctly different cosmologies. Smith’s increasing silence on, and later rejection of, the immediacy of the millennium is suggestive of the intellectual distance between the internal life of the Prophet and the public theology of popular Mormonism in the early years. And if Joseph Smith deflected attention from

## THE WORD BAZAAR

### ART BOOKS

#### A SCULPTOR'S TESTIMONY IN BRONZE AND STONE

*The Sacred Sculpture of Avard T. Fairbanks*  
By his son, Eugene F. Fairbanks

This profusely illustrated, 157-page, hardbound book includes a biography of an internationally famous sculptor. The illustrations are accompanied by descriptive text, and many statues are in LDS churches or temple sites. Price, prepaid, \$21.95, Fairbanks Art and Books, 2607 Vining Street, Bellingham, WA 98226-4230. 101

### OUT-OF-PRINT & RARE EDITIONS

#### LDS BOOKS BOUGHT & SOLD

We pay top dollar for out-of-print, used, and rare LDS books. Thousands of LDS books (new & used) for sale. Out-of-print book search available. Call, write, or visit our shop. Open Mon.–Fri., 10–6, Sat., 10–4. BENCHMARK BOOKS, 3269 S. MAIN, #250, P.O. BOX 9027, SALT LAKE CITY, UT 84109-0027 (801/486-3111). 102

### WOMEN'S PUBLICATIONS

#### EXPONENT II

Exponent II, a volunteer organization, publishes a quarterly newspaper addressing women’s issues in an LDS context. For 20 years, this personal essay format has provided a forum for women to exchange life experiences in an atmosphere of trust and acceptance. Past issues have discussed drug abuse, authority, the socialization of young women, and the Mormon

male. Regular columns by Judy Dushku, Emma Lou Thayne, and Laurel Ulrich. Edited by Sue Paxman. For a subscription, please send a check for \$15 (\$4 per issue) to: *Exponent II*, P.O. Box 128, Arlington, MA 02178. 100

### NEWSPAPERS & MAGAZINES

#### STUDENT REVIEW

BYU’s unofficial student magazine is now in its ninth year! Examine the life and issues at BYU through essays written by students and faculty—humorously, sometimes critically, but always sensitively. One-year subscriptions, \$15. *Student Review*, P.O. Box 2217, Provo, UT 84603. 099

#### SUNSTONE BACK ISSUES

We will pay top-dollar prices for out-of-print issues of SUNSTONE, volumes 1–4 and select others, or we will be even more generous in extending your SUNSTONE subscription in exchange for back issues. Sunstone, 331 Rio Grande Street, Suite 206, Salt Lake City, UT 84101 (801/355-5926). 999

### MORMON ORGANIZATIONS

#### MORMON ALLIANCE

Ecclesiastical/spiritual abuse occurs when a Church officer, acting in his calling and using the weight of his office, coerces compliance, imposes his personal opinions as Church doctrine or policy, or resorts to such power plays as threats and intimidation to insure that his views prevail in a conflict of opinions. The suggestion is that the member’s faith is weak, testimony

inadequate, and commitment to the Church lacking. The member who wants to talk about the issue frequently finds that the leader accuses him or her of “not supporting Church leaders.”

The Mormon Alliance listens to people who want to talk about such experiences. By documenting cases, we hope to encourage more sensitive leaders and more empowered members.

To report cases, write to the Mormon Alliance (6337 Highland Drive, Box 215, Salt Lake City, UT 84121) or telephone Lavina Fielding Anderson (801/467-1617). Subscriptions are \$30 per calendar year and include four newsletters and the annual volume of case reports. 104

### BOOKS

#### EBORN BOOKS — MAIL ORDER

Free catalog of thousands of used LDS books! Also, reprints of early LDS classics. EBORN BOOKS, P.O. BOX 2093, DEPT. B, PEORIA, AZ 85380. 101

#### WORD BAZAAR AD RATES

\$3 per line; four-line minimum (including headline) at \$12. Text lines counted at seven words per line; headline counts as one line (unless unreasonably long). Multiple-run discounts are 10% for four times, 15% for six, and 20% for eight. Other section titles may be specified, such as “printing services,” “books wanted,” etc. Payment must accompany the ad—we do not bill. Send ad text and check or credit card number to Word Bazaar, Sunstone Foundation, 331 Rio Grande, Suite 206, Salt Lake City, UT 84101 (fax 801/355-4043).

apocalyptic speculation by pushing the end into the future, Brigham Young, a great pragmatist who never allowed theological niceties to stand in the way of building the Kingdom, took a very different route to the same goal. Marvin Hill and D. Michael Quinn have both noted that Brigham Young, as he worked to establish his preeminence in the Church in April 1845, adopted the Shaker-like position that "the Kingdom of God has come," asking an assembled conference "know ye not that the millennium has commenced?"<sup>4</sup>

Here, then, lies a central problem that Underwood fails to address. Intent on overturning the Tuveson/Hansen thesis of a qualified Mormon postmillennialism, Underwood avoids confronting the quite different theological environment that developed during the Nauvoo years and during the decades of Kingdom-building in nineteenth-century Utah. More precisely, he refuses to engage with the central themes of the post-Missouri Church. The Church of the 1830s clearly lay in expectation of the restoration of Zion and the imminent second coming of Christ, a millenarian goal that was seriously compromised by the loss of the sacred temple site at Independence. After the Mormons' expulsion from Missouri, the building of the Holy City of Zion loomed as an increasingly long-term venture, and the date of the Second Coming was consequently pushed further and further into the future. Underwood is certainly aware of this transformation, but in his zeal to press his case of Mormon premillennialism, he avoids the challenge of examining comprehensively the transformation of millennial thinking after the Missouri years.

Such an examination would have to carefully explore the theology of Kingdom-building in the post-Missouri years, set in the way that Joseph Smith already had hedged in the coming of the millennium with human effort. The restoration of the true church involved not just a gathering of a chosen people but the building of the city of Zion, the tabernacle which would set the stage for the Second Coming, and the restoration of ancient ordinances, endowments, and mysteries. Clearly the requirement of perfection in this undertaking was a condition imposed from the beginning, a condition that itself increasingly delayed the coming of the millennium. The achievement of the restoration required considerable human effort that could easily be equated with the optimistic postmillennialism of the antebellum north. If Tuveson's and Hansen's argument for a qualified postmillennialism was an awkward and inadequate way of describing the intentions and effects of the Mormon Kingdom-

building, Underwood, unfortunately, does not venture an alternative approach.

Such an approach awaits further research and analysis, one that will reconcile original premillennialist expectations with the emergent priorities of building the Kingdom and living the restoration.<sup>5</sup> Grant Underwood has made a signal contribution to modern Mormon studies in highlighting the millenarian character of the early Church and the early converts. Both the strengths and the limits of his study open interesting possibilities for future inquiry. ☐

#### NOTES

1. The phrase is from Ruth Bloch, *Visionary Republic: Millennial Themes in American Thought, 1756-1800* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 143.

2. Ernest Lee Tuveson, *Redeemer Nation: The*

*Idea of America's Millennial Role* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1968), 175-186; Klaus J. Hansen, *Mormonism and the American Experience* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1981), 113-122; Marvin S. Hill, *Quest for Refuge: The Mormon Flight from American Pluralism* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1989), xx-xxi.

3. This pattern roughly parallels the decline of millenarian themes that has recently been found in the sermons noted in the detailed McLellin journals. See M. Theresa Baer, "Charting the Missionary Work of William E. McLellin: A Content Analysis," in *The Journals of William E. McLellin, 1831-1836*, ed. Jan Shippis and John W. Welch (Provo and Urbana: BYU Studies and Indiana University Press, 1994), 387-389.

4. Hill, *Quest for Refuge*, xv; D. Michael Quinn, *The Mormon Hierarchy: Origins of Power* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1994), 178, 403 n. 177.

5. Such an approach is sketched by Dan Vogel in *Religious Seekers and the Advent of Mormonism* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1988), 188-205.



#### OASIS

Suddenly, in a strange stream, there are cattail and carrizo, too many thorny plants to name, all of which love the water and aren't about to relinquish their chance at it. The Washingtonia palms stretch above their desolate oasis—a sudden blast through bow willows, mourning doves streak pearl and beige plumes of odd surprise. Ocotillo and cat's claw drag on my clothes. Devil's hand—and my bare legs have marks to show for this. Your wife waits sleeping by a tall palm downstream and we can't find our way back now; our calling does no good and we've seen too many boulders to make a difference. The Anza-Borrego is a vast badlands except for what we have searched here, this Rockhouse Canyon with its rumors of cabins from cattle linemen long ago and the burden of their fruitless disappointments. How we hope, only for a trail marker. We get incredibly brutal paths ending in thickets of snarled no-returns. "Rosalie! Rosalie!"—she will answer: "Eric." I am a name that tells where. No echo, no coconuts or dates, only myself to cover for. Fronds, camouflage, protection. Hermaphrodite, lonely trees. Vengeance? There are such canyons and these are canyons which seem to repudiate barren myths by their secret palm oases which bear no fruit, yet still split the sky with rustling motion. I wonder, how do they negotiate their passage? Rosalie and Eric will later sleep, wordlessly satisfied, resolute in their defenses which belie their remote quiet like all good things, slithering away, dribbling down, down.

—KARL ROSENQUIST

## RECENTLY RELEASED

Compiled by Will Quist

This section features recent titles of the Mormon press; the descriptions are often taken from promotional materials. Submissions are welcome, especially for books of LDS interest that are not by the major LDS publishers.

## BIOGRAPHY

**The Essential Joseph Smith.**

Foreword by Marvin S. Hill. Signature Books, 1995, hb, 266 p., \$22.95.

"Contains fifty of the most important letters, diary entries, speeches, and revelations of Mormonism's founding prophet."

**Henry Ballard: The Story of a Courageous Pioneer, 1832-1908.**

Ed. Douglas O. Crookston. No publisher, 1994, hb, 262 p., \$14.95.

A Mormon pioneer's journal, family notes, and the author's observations "make inspiring reading for all who are interested in Church history."

**The Kingdom of Matthias.** Paul E. Johnson and Sean Wilentz. Oxford University Press, 1994, hb, 222 p., \$25.00.

In 1834, "New York City was awash with rumors of a strange religious cult operating nearby, centered around a mysterious, self-styled prophet named Matthias . . . money . . . lascivious sexual relations . . . odd teachings [and then] legal charges."

**Rose Marie Reid: An Extraordinary Life Story.** Carole Reid Burr and Roger K. Petersen. Covenant Communications, 1995, hb, 220 p., \$15.95.

Rose Marie became "the largest manufacturer of women's swimsuits in the world," but was also noted for her dedication to her home and efforts to spread the gospel.

**Sidney Rigdon: A Portrait of Religious Excess.** Richard S. Van Wagoner. Signature Books, 1994, hb, 493 p., \$28.95.

Rigdon is seen as "Joseph Smith's principal advisor and spokesman," "the most influential early Mormon" next to Smith, and "a biographer's dream."

**Taylor-Made Tales.** Samuel W. Taylor. Aspen Books, 1994, pb, 214 p., \$7.95.

This grandson of President John Taylor "may well be the most successful Mormon author of all time [but] Sam's best story might be his own"—in this book.

## FICTION

**On the Run.** Jack Weyland. Deseret Book, 1995, hb, 182 p., \$13.95.

"The popular writer's fourteenth novel" fol-

lows the deadly adventures of an enthusiastic returning missionary and the reigning Miss Indian South Dakota, who are entangled in an FBI drug investigation.

**Storm Gold.** Lee Nelson. Council Press, 1994, hb, 276 p., \$14.95.

"Utah's favorite writer of historical fiction" relates the 1840 slaughter by Utes of nearly a thousand Spaniards at Rock Creek, Utah—"ending once and for all the era of the Spanish gold seekers." Ninth in the *Storm Testament* series.

**Tennis Shoes and the Feathered Serpent, Book One: A Novel.**

Chris Heimerdinger. Covenant Communications, 1995, pb, 284 p., \$10.95.

A man and his family cross time to emerge "in a land and time teetering on the brink of ultimate destruction. The time just prior to the Savior's appearance in the new world."

**Turning Hearts: Short Stories on Family Life.** Ed. Orson Scott Card and David Dollahite. Bookcraft, 1994, pb, 307 p., \$10.95.

"Short fiction that realistically addresses what it means to be part of a Latter-day Saint family [from] eighteen LDS writers."

## HISTORY

**1995-1996 Church Almanac.** *Deseret News*, 1994, pb, 432 p., \$6.95.

Information about the Church and the Saints, grouped by "General Authorities, Officers; Worldwide Church; Missions, Temples; Chronology, News in Review; Facts, Statistics."

**Historical Atlas of Mormonism.** Ed. S. Kent Brown, Donald Q. Cannon, and Richard H. Jackson. Simon and Schuster, 1994, oversize hb, 169 p., \$37.50.

Articles, two-color maps, and bibliographies chronicle "in meticulous detail the rise and spread of this burgeoning religion" from neighborhood to worldwide impact.

**The Korean Saints: Personal Stories of Trial and Triumph, 1950-1980.**

Comp. and ed. Spencer J. Palmer and Shirley H. Palmer. Religious Education, BYU, 1994, hb, 904 p., \$40.00.

"Derives from a wide variety of oral interviews and written accounts . . . involving nearly 300 first-generation Korean [converts] between 1950 and 1980."

**Mormon Americana: A Guide to Sources and Collections in the United States.** Ed. David J. Whittaker. *BYU Studies*, 1995, hb, 695 p., \$29.95.

"Rich treasures of manuscripts and printed materials have yet to be fully mined by students of the Latter-day Saint experience." Hence this guide to "the major repositories and sources of Mormon material."

**The Mysteries of Godliness: A History of Mormon Temple Worship.** David John Buerger. Smith Research Associates, 1994, hb, 234 p., \$24.95.

"Grounding the meaning of the endowment in both symbolism and context [to show] the syncretic interweaving of old and new traditions which make up this highest form of Mormon devotion."

## LIFESTYLE

**On Becoming a Disciple-Scholar: Lectures Presented at the Brigham Young University Honors Program Discipline and Discipleship Lecture Series.** Ed. Henry B. Eyring. Bookcraft, 1995, pb, 113 p., \$8.95.

Neal A. Maxwell, Paul A. Cox, Cecil O. Samuelson Jr., James S. Jardine, Dallin H. Oaks, and the editor "will uplift the mind and spirit of students of all ages who wish to infuse their studies with deep faith and conviction."

**On Being a Parent: The Crash Course in Character Development.** Beppie Harrison. Bookcraft, 1995, hb, 130 p., \$12.95.

"Whether you are in your first days of Parenting 101 or are now engaged in "postgraduate" activities, this book will help you understand and appreciate God's purposes in inviting you to enroll in this course of courses known as being a parent."

## SCRIPTURE

**Joseph Smith's Commentary on the Bible.** Comp. and ed. Kent P. Jackson. Deseret Book, 1994, hb, 237 p., \$16.95.

"Statements in which [Joseph Smith] discussed, analyzed, or drew significant application from biblical verses are gathered from diverse primary sources into this volume to enhance your study of the Bible."

**The Story of the Book of Abraham: Mummies, Manuscripts, and Mormonism.** H. Donl Peterson. Deseret Book, 1995, hb, 302 p., \$21.95.

This "result of original research . . . much of it never published before, that can be found nowhere else in collected, usable form, [gives] a clearer understanding of the history . . . of the papyri associated with the Book of Abraham."

# THE SECRET HISTORY OF MORMONISM

THE REFINER'S FIRE: THE MAKING OF  
MORMON COSMOLOGY, 1644-1844

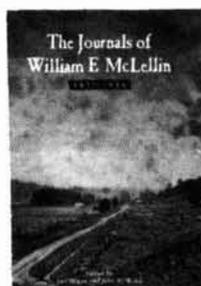
by John L. Brooke  
Cambridge University Press, 1994  
xix+421 pages, \$34.95

THE JOURNALS OF WILLIAM E. MCLELLIN, 1831-1836

edited by Jan Shipps and John W. Welch  
BYU Studies and University of Illinois Press, 1994  
xxi+520 pages, \$29.95



Reviewed by Richard L. Bushman



*McLellin's diaries are usefully read with The Refiner's Fire because they provide a test of Brooke's arguments that hermeticism influenced early Mormonism.*

THE HUNDREDS OF thousands of new converts added each year to the nine million Mormons who now comprise The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints are a phenomenon of the present that changes the understanding of the past. Joseph Smith might easily be dismissed as another religious eccentric in a time of chaotic religious creativity had the Mormons not persisted and flourished. But of all the visionaries and sectarian leaders who formed new religions and communal orders in the 1830s and 1840s, Joseph Smith had the longest-lasting and most widespread

RICHARD BUSHMAN is the author of *Joseph Smith and the Beginnings of Mormonism* and most recently *The Refinement of America: Persons, Houses, Cities*. He is *Gouverneur Morris* professor of history at Columbia University.

effect. That fact makes us think differently about his place in history. Why did Mormonism survive, while hundreds of movements withered away, and then go on to outgrow all the other survivors? Harold Bloom, noted literary critic and recent commentator on American religion, has called Joseph Smith an authentic religious genius. This extravagant assessment, which would have drawn laughter and scorn in 1844, has to be taken seriously a century and a half after his death, in light of the millions who still regard him as a prophet. Joseph Smith now requires serious explanation.

Beginning with the earliest revelations, interested observers have tried to "situate" Mormonism culturally in an effort to explain the remarkable texts that flowed from Joseph Smith's mind. Where did the revelations come from, what background illuminates their meaning? The first hostile readers of the

Book of Mormon spoke of an old Bible from which Smith and Oliver Cowdery contrived their account. Alexander Campbell said the Book of Mormon tried to answer all the theological controversies that had troubled New York for the past ten years. Nineteenth-century editions of *Roget's Thesaurus* linked Joseph Smith's revelations with Mohammed and false prophets. In the twentieth century, anti-Masonry was brought into the picture. In more recent years, the influence of primitivist restorationism, republicanism, and magic have all received book-length treatments by serious historians, and Harold Bloom has offered a gnostic Joseph Smith who, by dint of pure genius, recovered cabalistic religion for nineteenth-century Americans. Brigham Young University scholars have discovered an extensive, intricate, and detailed context in ancient Israelitish and Middle Eastern culture.

Now, in an ambitious and erudite reading of Mormon culture from the beginning to the present, John Brooke throws still more ingredients into the mix: first, hermeticism (the agglomeration of alchemy, Platonism, Gnosticism, and Egyptian theology that flourished in the Renaissance), and, second, the Radical Reformation, with its millennial, restorationist, and other doctrines. Though admitting that his is not "a well-rounded approach," Brooke claims that the first of these, hermeticism, explains "the inner logic of Mormon theology" (xvii).

The Radical Reformation tradition, which includes Anabaptists, Quakers, and many other sects on the fringes of the Magisterial Reformation, is the better known and, in Brooke's telling, the lesser of the two influences. Though elaborately worked out and ingeniously formulated by Brooke, radical ideas are familiar in their general outlines. Millenarianism, for one, has received full treatment by Grant Underwood. Moreover, when Brooke narrates Mormon history, he downplays the Radical Reformation. He gives considerable space to tracing radical groups like the Connecticut Rogerenes through eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century New England, but when he gets to Mormonism itself, radical influences recede. In Brooke's view, radical doctrines contributed to Mormonism, but did not shape its inner logic. Brooke thinks radical beliefs affected the first few years, but after 1831 added only details. His chief interest in the radical sects is that they were open to the hermeticism that he sees at Mormonism's center.

*The Refiner's Fire* can be read as an extension of the scholarship on hermeticism that

**For all of its flaws, Brooke's book enables us to see our own religion in a new light. It was a religion of wonders, of supernatural powers, of belief in visions and divine words, of mysterious histories and awesome futures.**

has appeared over the past thirty years, ever since Frances Yates's *Giordano Bruno and the Hermetic Traditions* (1964) reawakened interest in the influence hermeticism had from the Renaissance to the seventeenth century. The name "hermeticism" comes from Hermes Trismegistus, purportedly a divine being whose revelations claimed to precede Moses but who is thought to be, in reality, a creation of second- and third-century gnostics who fused Greek and Egyptian ideas. The Florentine Cosimo Medici acquired a collection of hermetic writings, the *Corpus Hermeticum*, in Macedonia in 1460 and ordered his court scholar Marsilio Ficino to work on them. Recent scholarship has demonstrated the wide influence of hermeticism throughout Europe thereafter. Brooke briefly recapitulates these studies and shows how hermeticism's reach extends into eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century America, right down to the Smith family. In America, the most complete expressions of hermeticism occurred at the Ephrata Cloister, a German religious community of mid-eighteenth-century Pennsylvania, and in Royal Arch Freemasonry, which had chapters in many early nineteenth-century American towns. Drawing on hermeticism's connections to alchemy, Brooke hints that counterfeiters, miners, and virtually anyone who mentioned the word "gold" could have transmitted hermetic secrets, although he eventually concludes that such shadowy figures drew upon a "thin vein" (93).

Brooke's primary reason for thinking hermeticism must have been transmitted to Mormonism is that he sees similarities to the mature teachings of Joseph Smith: (1) Hermetic philosophy taught that matter emerged from the divine spirit at creation, forming the great division of spirit and matter, along with other divisions such as light and dark, fire and water, and male and female. Mormonism taught that there is no such thing as immaterial matter; spirit is a refined form of matter. (2) Hermeticism sought the reunion of spirit and matter through the analogy of an alchemical marriage, the *coniunctio*. Mormonism made celestial marriage a requirement for exaltation. (3) The goal of hermeticism was to recover divine power and perfection ("divinization" is Brooke's word). Mormonism promised that the

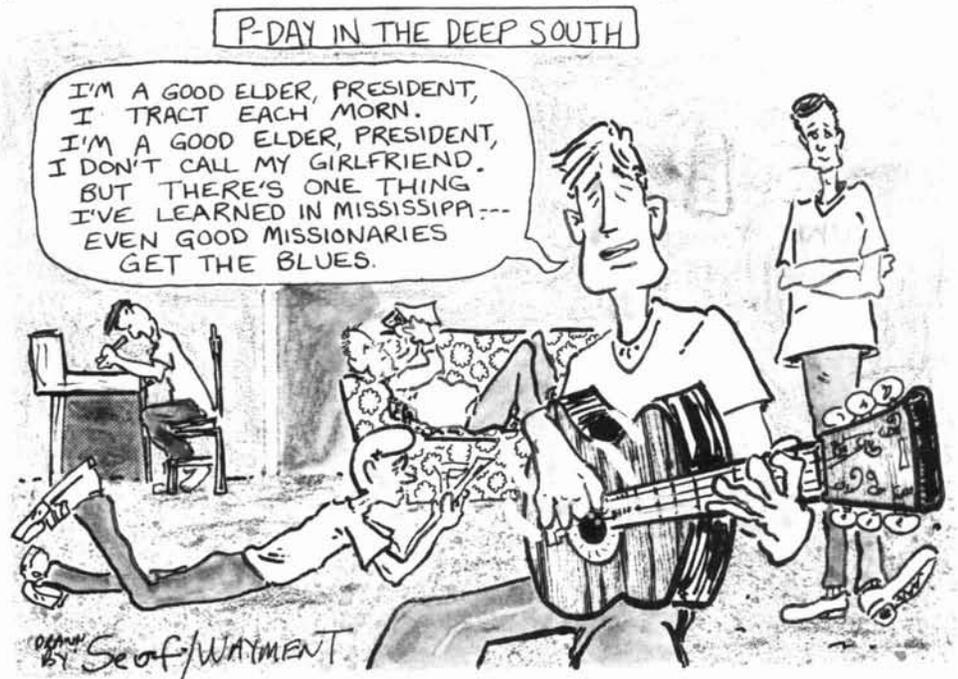
faithful would become gods. These parallels lead Brooke to argue that Mormonism should be understood as more of an hermetic restoration than a return to primitive Christianity.

Having heard presentations by Brooke before reading *The Refiner's Fire*, and knowing Lance Owens's scholarship on the Jewish kabbalah, a related set of mystical teachings, I was prepared to look favorably on the relationship of hermeticism and Mormonism.<sup>1</sup> The idea of placing Mormonism against a background different from standard Protestant orthodoxy appealed to me. Although Mormons believe that Joseph Smith received revelations directly from God, there is no denying that many of his ideas are not new. Other Christians taught faith and repentance, atonement through the sacrifice of Jesus Christ, resurrection, the promise of a second coming, and so on. The revelations took ideas that were familiar to Christians and clarified them, or gave them new meaning, as well as offering startlingly new stories and doctrines. The gospel was both new and everlasting. Robert Matthews has suggested that retranslating the Bible prompted Joseph Smith to seek elucidation, which led to many new revelations growing out of biblical texts. The teachings of the religious world around him, questions from his

followers, and incidents of everyday life moved Joseph to seek answers which then grew in unforeseen directions, blossoming into explications of doctrine that went far beyond the original stimulus. In a sense, Joseph Smith as revelator could be said to have had a green thumb: from the smallest seed he grew mustard trees.

For the most part, however, we have thought that the scriptural and doctrinal stimuli to inquire of God came from within the bounds of Protestantism. Mormonism has been understood as one variant of the widespread Protestant impulse to restore primitive Christianity. But what if, I speculated, orthodox Protestantism was too confined to serve as a basis for the entire restoration? What if some of heaven's truths reached beyond the bounds of this single tradition, this one way of reading the Bible? How refreshing it would be to discover another religious tradition, wherein other seeds of religious truth could be found by a prophet with a green thumb. Mormon scholars who know kabbalah, hermeticism, and the associated pursuits of alchemy have felt sympathy for some of their doctrines. Why couldn't Joseph receive a spiritual stimulus from this alternate source, thus expanding the boundaries of the Restoration?

So I began the perusal of *The Refiner's Fire*



with hope that connections could be made. I was not looking for the "sources" of Joseph's ideas in the usual environmentalist sense of locating the places he mined to piece together his theology. My interest was in the sources of language used in the revelations, since we are told they are given in the language of the recipients (D&C 1:24). Were there alternate ideas or words used in the revelations that would open vistas hidden to conventional orthodoxies? Perhaps hermeticism provided an expanded vocabulary for Restoration revelations.

My hope for development of this line of inquiry faltered, however, as I worked my way through *The Refiner's Fire*. The historical evidence for a connection with Joseph simply was not there. Brooke believes that he has recovered the route of hermeticism from late Renaissance England to the northeastern United States in the nineteenth century. The path has to have been fairly broad, for, if the argument is to work, hermeticism had to have made a powerful impact on Joseph Smith and on a large proportion of the people who believed him. These exotic ideas had to have ignited Smith's religious imagination and displaced the conventional Christianity of Methodism and Presbyterianism that was all about him. How did hermeticism arrive in the northeastern United States in sufficient strength to arouse the Prophet and his followers?

Brooke points to hermetic ideas filtering into high culture through Emmanuel Swedenborg via the Transcendentalists and a few medical men who reportedly conducted alchemical experiments, but he does not claim that the Smiths were in touch with these bookish people. The other routes are equally dim. The Ephrata Cloister, which Brooke calls the highwater mark of hermeticism in the colonies, disappeared a half century before Mormonism got started, hardly evidence of hermeticism's vitality and viability. During Ephrata's brief existence, Brooke can locate only a few visitors passing

back and forth who might have carried the Cloister's ideas to New England, and there is no evidence that the ideas took hold.

Another possible source of hermeticism was Royal Arch Freemasonry, whose roots reached back to hermetic Rosicrucianism. Brooke says that Joseph Smith Sr. was too poor to join the Masons himself, but he assumes that, despite Masonic oaths of secrecy, the family was "exposed" to Masonic ideas through books and conversation. But Freemasonry, by his own description, makes virtually nothing of the fundamental hermetic ideas that he believes most influenced Mormonism: the primal unity of spirit and matter, divine marriage, and divinization. Royal Arch Masonry embraced none of the doctrines that Brooke thinks were at the heart of Mormonism's inner logic. If those hermetic elements were absent from Freemasonry, there is no visible link between fundamental hermetic principles and Mormonism. He cannot point to a single site where Joseph Smith could have learned about the ideas that supposedly influenced him most. *Refiner's Fire* is not only a history of the occult, it is itself occult in requiring secret transmission of key ideas. The operant words throughout the book are "might have" and "possibly."

A lot of the argument rests on the presumed similarities of hermeticism and Mormonism. But to a great extent, the similarities are in the eye of the beholder. Each reader will have to decide if apples are basically like oranges. With his powerfully synthetic mind, Brooke sees similarities, and he misses differences. Take spirit and matter, for instance. Hermeticism saw matter as coming from the divine spirit at creation and returning to its primal condition as pure spirit. Joseph Smith said that spirit was refined matter and that matter was not created; both spirit and matter were eternal with God and would last for all eternity. Instead of obliterating matter, Mormonism gives it eternal standing; instead of subsuming matter into

spirit, Mormonism defines spirit as matter. Brooke admits that the Mormon creation story "did not quite match the hermetic ideal of *creatio ex deo*," but "it came quite close" (202). Other supposed similarities are equally mismatched. Alchemical marriage sought to unite male and female opposites to resolve them into one; *Coniunctio* resulted in a perfected hermaphroditic Adam with no gender. Mormon celestial marriage perpetuated gender through all eternity, including procreation of children. In Mormonism, sexual differences are never to end—scarcely what the hermetics had in mind. Many Mormons will have trouble recognizing Joseph's teachings in Brooke's hermeticism.

Brooke's main argument is neither convincing nor discerning. The forcing of resemblances results, I believe, from a compulsion that afflicts many non-Mormon writers: the requirement of foreclosing any possibility of divine revelation in Joseph's life requires unbelieving writers to leave little room for any creativity at all, for fear Mormons will pounce upon any originality and declare it to be the work of God. Brooke is determined to find a precedent somewhere for every Mormon idea, even if he must reach back a century or two. He tells us that baptism for the dead was practiced at Ephrata and plural marriage was known among the German sect of Schwenkfelders in the Radical Reformation. The name of the Melchizedek priesthood appeared in one of the Masonic orders. Looking out over the vast sea of past cultural practices, Brooke's eye picks out every piece of floating debris that resembles a Mormon idea.

This heavy-duty "culturalism," as Richard Poirier has termed it, in a review of David S. Reynolds's *Walt Whitman's America* (1994), has its limits. Reynolds pursues the historical sources of Whitman's poetry with the same energy that Brooke lavishes on Joseph Smith. But in the end, Reynolds misses something. Poirier observes that Reynolds's "flat-minded understanding of the workings of literary

## ORDER YOUR MORMON BOOKS (NEW & OLD) FROM BENCHMARK

**Can't find certain LDS titles? Call us.**

Benchmark Books stocks thousands of LDS books — both out-of-print and in-print, including many of the latest titles. Call, write, or visit us:

### Benchmark Books

3269 So. Main St., Suite 250

Salt Lake City, Utah 84115

Local Phone: 486-3111

Open Mon.-Fri. 10-6; Sat. 10-4

We accept MasterCard, Visa, and Discover.

**TO ORDER, CALL  
TOLL-FREE**

**1 (800) 486-3112**

**MOST ORDERS SHIPPED  
WITHIN 24 HOURS.**

**The diaries are most valuable for showing how Mormon missionaries did their work in the early years. They suggest that Mormonism flourished because religious life was much more fluid in the 1830s than it is depicted in the standard denominational histories.**

language” stops him from closely examining the texts, and as a result, he fails to see that “Whitman inherits nothing that he does not change.”<sup>2</sup> Brooke cannot look too carefully at Joseph’s distinctive ideas for fear he will find changes and elaborations that cannot be accounted for except to credit Joseph’s genius. Harold Bloom’s bestowal of that word on Joseph acknowledged Joseph Smith’s creativity. Brooke refuses to allow for any originality except for a kind of pallid talent in assembling old ideas.

Introducing the word “genius” is admittedly a dangerous game for secular writers, for works of genius are by their nature, inexplicable. Genius, by common admission, carries human achievement beyond the limits of simple historical explanation, just as revelation does. To say that the Book of Mormon could only be written by a genius is logically not much different from saying God revealed it. In both cases, we admit that historical analysis fails us. Genius implies that some human creations cannot be explained, and yet we have no other way to account for Mozart or Einstein. Contemporary writers happily acknowledge artistic and scientific genius but are loath to admit any form of religious inspiration. The consequence is flat-minded readings of Joseph Smith wherein only similarities are permitted to show. None of the wonder of his marvelous powers, surely a part of his magnetism, finds its way into secular accounts.

Brooke is an ingenious writer who works many themes. After connecting Mormonism to hermeticism, he goes on to explain the cycles of change throughout Mormon history. The Book of Mormon and the first revelations, he says, were not under the influence of hermeticism. The first converts were drawn by magic (seerstones and divining), miracles, and the doctrines of the Radical Reformation. But after 1831, hermetic influences began to take over, until the hermetic restoration was complete in Nauvoo in 1844 and continued into Utah through the middle 1850s. Then Brigham Young and other early hermeticists gradually retreated toward a more conventional Christianity. John Taylor’s *The Mediation and Atonement* is cited as a document of standard Protestantism. Hermetic religion sought for power and redemption through sacred knowledge and holy ritual

rather than through grace and atonement. Brooke thinks that standard Protestant doctrines gave way in Nauvoo during the height of the hermetic restoration and then reasserted themselves by the end of the nineteenth century. Taylor’s *Meditation and Atonement* marked a return to reformation Christianity.

**M**ORMON historians will protest this gloss of the 1840s and 1850s and can easily assemble tons of evidence (including the Articles of Faith) to counter Brooke. But one part of his thesis can be tested by perusal of the edition of the William E. McLellin papers, which appeared within a few months of *The Refiner’s Fire*. McLellin’s missionary diaries from 1831 through 1836, published with full scholarly apparatus, were a subject of ongoing controversy long before they saw the light of day. They were thought to be locked away in the Church vaults or in the hands of Mark Hofmann, who had obtained them from private owners. Probably prompted by the rumors, the Church did locate the diaries in the First Presidency vault. The documents disappointed readers who believed that McLellin, after his excommunication in 1838, would have exposed the evildoings of Church leaders. The diaries turned out to be an interesting but pedestrian, day-by-day record of missionary journeys with little to satisfy a taste for gossip.

The preceding controversy, however, prompted a full-scale treatment when the diaries finally came out. In the book, they are ensconced between two introductory essays and four studies of the diary offered as “supplemental resources.” Jan Shipps, John Welch, and William Hartley set the diaries in the contexts of American religious history, scriptural narratives of missionary activity, and the history of the Church. The longest essays are a full-fledged and highly informative biography of McLellin by Larry Porter and a quantitative analysis of sermon topics, audiences, and reception by Teresa Baer. This is the kind of full-scale treatment that is reserved for significant documents, of which this is surely one.

McLellin’s diaries are usefully read with *The Refiner’s Fire* because they provide a test for Brooke’s arguments. Do we, for example,

find evidence of hermetic tastes in McLellin? The answer is no, but that in itself does not undercut Brooke’s case. In Brooke’s view, the Radical Reformation exercised the greatest influence on the Book of Mormon and the early revelations, so early converts may have signed on to an especially vigorous rendition of millenarian and restorationist Christianity and nothing more. Then, as hermeticism took hold through the 1830s, these early converts, Brooke would say, grew disillusioned and fell away. McLellin’s chronology follows that pattern. He preached Mormonism through the midwest from 1832 to 1836, began to lose confidence in 1836, and was entirely disaffected by 1838, when many other early Mormons left the Church.

Where McLellin fails to serve Brooke’s purpose is in his reasons for leaving the Church. Hermetic doctrines did not repel him. Instead, he was disappointed when he did not have visions at the dedication of the Kirtland temple as Joseph Smith had promised. McLellin himself said that he did not leave the Church because of its doctrines

## Eighth Printing

REVISED THIRD EDITION

### FOR THOSE WHO WONDER

Managing Religious Questions and Doubts



**D. Jeff Burton**  
Foreword by Lowell L. Bennion

**\$7 at LDS Booksellers**

"but because *the leading men* to a great extent left their religion and run into and after speculation, pride, and popularity" (321). Like others, McLellin lost faith after the failure of the Mormon bank in Kirtland in 1836 and 1837. His was a conventional apostasy, scarcely a recoil from hermeticism.

Rather than bearing on Brooke's thesis, the diaries and the analytical articles are most valuable for showing how Mormon missionaries did their work in the early years. They played upon the widespread interest in religion that spilled over the boundaries of denominational religion and allowed any preacher with a message to gain a hearing. McLellin could walk into town, announce the time and place for meeting, and as often as not draw an audience to hear him out. His diaries suggest that Mormonism flourished because religious life was much more fluid in the 1830s than it is depicted in the standard denominational histories.

THE publication of *The Refiner's Fire* will keep Mormon scholars on the lookout for hermeticism for a long time. The topic has not yet been exhausted. Lance Owens thinks that Alexander Neibaur's collection of cabalistic texts may have filtered through to Joseph Smith. That idea calls for testing. Moreover, Mormon historians have to characterize and explain the creative turn in Joseph Smith's theology in Nauvoo, where many of Mormonism's distinctive doctrines matured. If Brooke's explanation is unsatisfactory, how are we to conceive of that era?

For all of its flaws, Brooke's book enables us to see our own religion in a new light. It is helpful to understand that early nineteenth-century religion was not a monopoly of college-trained ministers and denominational churches. Beyond the classic theological and ecclesiastical problems, beyond evangelical revivals, there was a religion of wonders, of supernatural powers, of belief in visions and divine words, of mysterious histories and awesome futures. In the interstices between the churches were believers who were not caught in the clutches of Calvinism and for whom salvation was more than a matter of divine grace. Mormonism was one of the religions that did not have to wrestle free of Calvinist theology. Faith, repentance, and the atonement were indeed fundamental in Mormon theology to the end of Joseph Smith's life, but his revelations spoke also of "great treasures of knowledge, even hidden treasures," of "the Almighty pouring down knowledge from heaven upon the heads of the Latter-day Saints," and of how "it is im-

possible for a man to be saved in ignorance" (D&C 89:19, 121:33, 131:6). Those words convey the uncalvinistic promise that treasures of knowledge might themselves be redemptive and that access to the secrets of God might bring mankind closer to heaven. Brooke's comparison with hermeticism highlights that side of Joseph Smith's Mormonism. ☞

## NOTES

1. See "Joseph Smith and Kabbalah: The Occult Connection," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 27:3 (fall 1994), 117-196.
2. Richard Poirier, "The Escape Artist," *The New Republic*, 19 June 1995, 33-39.



## PROMISED THINGS

It was when they'd closed up his skull for a time  
to see if he would open his eyes and who he'd be  
they said you should get out  
take some time away there is nothing you can do here  
until it seemed that maybe I could  
maybe some fresh air and faces would after all  
would do the trick so I told him I was going  
told his empty face how soon I'd be back  
put his hand beneath the sheets  
tucked him in like this had always been his room

and went where it was a holiday by the music  
and decorations coiled around each column, and people  
seemingly capable of such speed  
they thundered as they passed in sounds I knew to be words  
but that only nudged me harmlessly like metallic balloons  
and one little girl was crying into her candy  
throwing her shoes at anyone who came close  
while her parents patted and shushed  
and promised things when she got home;

still it might've been okay  
but for the cinnamon-sweet potpourri  
insinuating however gently with warm places and times  
that Christmas was coming here  
would snow even me under egg nog and holly berry  
until I could never find my way back there  
to the other side of the glass  
where it was only winter  
but where my son lay waiting  
and warming to speak.

—C. WADE BENTLEY