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## BACKGROUND BOOKS

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# THE MORMONS' PROGRESS

For Latter-day Saints, "once upon a time" was yesterday. Perhaps a majority of today's adult Saints grew up in a different universe, one insulated from the larger culture, a world that was divided between "them" and "us." Young Saints learned how to recognize "the other" before they learned their ABCs. Today much of this has changed: "By 1980," writes religious historian Martin Marty, "the Mormons had grown to be...like everyone else in America."

That earlier Mormon-Gentile dichotomy dominated the literature of Mormonism until the middle of this century. Works about the Saints could be conveniently divided into pro- and anti-Mormon categories. Joseph Smith, the founder of the faith, was either a prophet or a profiteer—a religious genius, divinely called to lead a new dispensation, or a humbug, an outright fraud. Those who responded to his call were either progenitors of a new chosen people, called out from among the nations, or simply followers of a compelling charismatic figure whose message was nothing but a Christian heresy.

After World War II, a new type of Mormon literature came into existence: Well-trained Mormon scholars started examining critically their own history and culture, and non-Mormon scholars began investigating Mormonism without preconceptions. This new age in Mormon studies was ushered in by the publication between 1945 and 1958 of four remarkable books: **No Man Knows My History: The Life of Joseph Smith, the Mormon Prophet** by Fawn McKay Brodie, **The Mountain Meadows Massacre** by Juanita Brooks, **The Great Basin Kingdom: An Economic History of the Latter-day Saints, 1830-1900** by Leonard J. Arrington, and **The Mormons** by Thomas F. O'Dea. Taken together, they illustrate the change that occurred in Mormon studies as the "olden days" slowly started to pass away.

Fawn Brodie was reared in Utah. As a niece of David O. McKay, who became president of the LDS Church in 1951, she had grown up among the LDS elite. But she departed from Zion when she went to study literature at the

University of Chicago. Her beautifully written biography of the prophet was published in 1945 when she was only 25, but it was the work of a mature scholar and represented the first genuine effort to come to grips with the contradictory evidence about Smith's early life. The canonized history of LDS beginnings is contained in the first six volumes of the **Documentary History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints** (edited by B. H. Roberts, 1907-1930). Brodie used non-Mormon sources as well as the evidence in the *Documentary History* to reach a noncanonical conclusion: Smith was a gifted young farmer who dabbled in folk magic and made up a story about golden plates that he himself later came to believe. The Saints were exceedingly offended by this interpretation, and Brodie was excommunicated. But the influence of her book could not be expunged.

Mormonism, unlike other modern religions, is a faith cast in the form of history. Thus, at one time, any "profane" (i.e. secular) investigation of that history was like trespassing on forbidden ground. Causing nearly as much stir as Brodie was Juanita Brooks in her investigation of *The Mountain Meadows Massacre* (1950). In 1857, during the Utah Mormon War, a group of Mormons and Indians had murdered every adult in a California-bound wagon train as it tried to pass through southern Utah. Brooks came to distrust the official LDS accounts, which denied complicity in the terrible tragedy. She retrieved the story piecemeal from pioneer letters and diaries and interviews with Saints whose ancestors had participated in the tragedy. She explained the actions of both victims and perpetrators in terms of wartime hysteria, which vividly evoked the intensity of the "them" and "us" mindset on both sides.

Unlike Brodie, Brooks continued to affirm her faith in public and, perhaps for that reason, managed to maintain her standing in the church. She became living proof that a Mormon historian need not ignore evidence that placed individual Mormons and their church in a bad light.

Leonard Arrington's *The Great Basin King-*

dom (1958) explained much of Mormon history up to 1900 in terms of the marketplace. The Saints were able to make "the desert blossom as the rose" not because "the Lord caused his face to shine on them," nor even because they were worthy and hardworking, but because Salt Lake City became an entrepôt for would-be miners traveling to the California gold rush. Arrington's interpretation sounds hardly shocking to non-Mormons now, but Church Apostle Boyd K. Packer even today instructs Mormon students to "see the hand of the Lord in every hour and every moment of the church from its beginning till now." Despite being an active churchman, Arrington told the Mormon story using the kind of explanations that would have described ordinary human beings just as well as they did chosen people living in the promised land.

Brooks and Arrington thus set the pattern for "the New Mormon History," which has now become the standard academic approach to the Mormon past. The independent university presses—particularly the University of Illinois Press—became the usual publishers for this approach that did not question the legitimacy of Mormonism but required scholars to place the

movement in context and to use the full range of available resources and analytical techniques. Two outstanding

general histories written in this new objective vein were James B. Allen and Glen M. Leonard's **The Story of the Latter-day Saints** (Deseret Books, 1976) and Leonard J. Arrington and Davis Bitton's **The Mormon Experience** (Knopf, 1979).

The remaining work in the original quartet of studies, Thomas F. O'Dea's *The Mormons* (1957), was not history so much as it was a cul-

tural inquiry. O'Dea, a Roman Catholic sociologist, analyzed the Mormon belief system, arguing that, as Tolstoy had asserted years before, Mormonism is "the American religion," impossible to understand apart from the culture of its time. "Mormonism represents a theological version of the American attitude of practical activism," O'Dea wrote. It "elaborated an American theology of self-deification through effort, an active transcendentalism of achievement."

The new era in Mormon studies was thriving by the mid-1960s when *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* was launched. This independent periodical treated controversial topics and welcomed Mormon and non-Mormon points of view. Church officials were obviously uncomfortable when *Dialogue* intellectuals confronted issues such as the prohibition against black priests, but they did not interfere. Their policy of toleration was further tested when a group of Brigham Young University students started the more radical *Sunstone*, which was willing to publish articles about the subservient role of Mormon women and the murky origins of the Book of Mormon.

Today, one of the controversial areas in Mormon studies follows in the tradition started by Thomas O'Dea, trying to fit Mormon history into the context of American culture. Lawrence Foster's **Religion and Sexuality** (Oxford Univ., 1981), for example, shows that in 19th-century America the Mormons were far from alone in sexual experimentation. From the Shakers, who tried to give up sex altogether, to the Oneida community, which practiced a complex free-love system, there was in the new democracy a general search for alternatives to traditional family structures.

Foster's (and O'Dea's) question—where do Mormons fit in the spectrum of American culture and history?—is one of the great controversies among the historians of Mormonism today. At one end of the debate is Mark Leone's **The Roots of Modern Mormonism** (Harvard, 1983), which makes the Marxist argument that Mormonism is "a religion for subordinates which serves to maintain their condition intact." At the other end is Kenneth H. Winn's **Exiles in a Land of Liberty** (Univ. of N.C., 1989), which sees the Saints and their opponents as siblings in a new republic, both claiming to embody republican ideology, both decry-



ing "the growing economic inegalitarianism of Jacksonian society."

Klaus J. Hansen's **Mormonism and the American Experience** (Univ. of Chicago, 1984) makes the interesting and important point that Mormonism was merely temporally "out of step with [American] social reality." Although the early Mormons were "building their antimodern kingdom of God," Hansen says, even in the 19th century they were already developing "those modern habits of initiative and self-discipline that helped dig the grave of the kingdom and ushered in a new breed of Mormon thoroughly at home in the corporate economy of America." Hansen concludes that it is "nothing less than a modern miracle" that "within a generation a people that had been the very epitome of an antibourgeois mentality became one of the mainstays of the American middle-class culture."

A final important category of Mormon studies is that which considers Mormonism first and foremost as a religion. Sterling M. McMurrin's **Theological Foundations of the Mormon Religion** (Univ. of Utah, 1965) compares Mormonism to other religious movements in the Western world. McMurrin describes Mormonism as a form of Christianity that could well have emerged in ancient times

if St. Paul had not challenged the Jewish Apostle Peter for leadership of the Christian community. My own **Mormonism: The Story of A New Religious Tradition** (Univ. of Ill., 1985) argues that Mormonism is related to existing forms of Christianity (and Judaism) in much the way that early Christianity was related to the Hebrew tradition of its day.

When we compare Mormonism to other religions we can see why the historical transformations within the church were not the "fault" of the U.S. government or any other agency. Those transformations are changes that take place in every religion as it learns to live "in the world but not of it." The Saints are no longer all gathered into their own kingdom in the West. They are everywhere and, like the early Christians, they have had to learn to live in the world. As late as midcentury, being born a Mormon was analogous, in relation to the larger American society, to being born Jewish; today it is perhaps not much more different than being born into any Protestant sect. Within the sacred space of the Mormon temple rituals, the Saints remain a chosen people. Outside, in everyday life, they are simply members of a church, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. The rest of us are no longer even Gentiles. We are merely nonmembers.

—Jan Shippo

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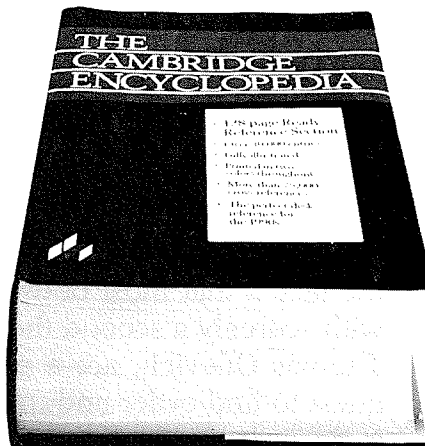
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