

realistic fiction and with biography written in a fair and open spirit and not with a yen to depreciate Mormons. Once we have more concrete examples of realistic writing at its best, we can better judge its value.

A SMALL HELPING OF MORMONISM

D. L. Ashliman

Mahlzeiten, a film directed by Edgar Reitz, is one of the most recent and most highly praised of the Young German productions. D. L. Ashliman, an instructor of German at the University of Pittsburgh, wrote this review while he was studying at the University of Göttingen under a grant from the German government. He has written articles on the image of Mormonism in Germany for the *Utah Historical Quarterly* and the *Brigham Young University Studies*.

Mahlzeiten is one of Germany's most discussed current films, and one which will be of special interest to Latter-day Saints. The plot could be reduced to sound like a sensational nineteenth-century thriller: a young married couple is converted to the Mormon religion, he shortly afterward commits suicide, and she emigrates to America with a third Mormon. But there is much more than this to Reitz's production, which even *Der Spiegel's* normally vitriolic reviewers called "a cool, sensible film—the best thus far of the Young German production" (March 27, 1967, p. 122).

"Cool" describes this production well; the film abounds in cold, dispassionate realism, which is both its strength and its weakness. Reitz's exclusive use of improvised dialogue gives the film freshness and candor, but many viewers will feel that his selection of scenes from the lives of seemingly ordinary people is too mundane. And there are those who will be offended by his inclusion of certain revealing (but clinically dispassionate) bedroom and bathroom scenes.¹

The plot, beyond the distorted skeleton mentioned above, is worth noting. Rolf (played by Georg Hauke) seems to be well on the way toward the realization of his life long goal, to become a doctor. Even his courtship with Elisabeth (Heidi Stroh) and her subsequent pregnancy are no serious threat to his success. The two lovers marry, but Elisabeth's view of life as one continuous dinner party (hence the film's title) and her rapid succession of pregnancies are financially and psychologically more than Rolf's medical studies can withstand. He makes an attempt at a related profession, selling pharmaceutical products to doctors, but is also unsuccessful there.

At the depth of the young family's depression, two Mormon missionaries enter the scene. The parts are suitably taken by actual Mormon elders,² speaking typical missionary German; the spectators are treated to a standard "door speech" and to part of an authentic discussion on the need for modern-day revelation. Later in the conversion process the young couple is shown through the Hamburg Stake Center by eager American missionaries. The climax is a

¹*Mahlzeiten* has been placed categorically off limits to the missionaries of at least two of the German missions.

²One reviewer stated that permission to use actual missionaries had to come from Salt Lake City (*Schwäbische Donau-Zeitung*, March 17, 1967). From the preceding footnote it is obvious that some Church officials regret the Church's cooperation in making the film.

riverside baptismal service, complete with the singing of hymn number 196, "We Thank Thee O God for a Prophet" (in English), and the immersion of the happy couple (albeit without the validating baptismal prayers). Rolf cheerfully notes that he can now call his wife "sister." But their happiness is short lived; Mormonism only temporarily retards their decline, which finds its nadir in Rolf's suicide.

The young widow is still attractive, in spite of her five children, and she finds a suitable mate in a fellow Mormon. The two are married, and she emigrates with him to America. The final scenes of the film show snapshots of an idealistic family life in a utopian setting, but the viewer suspects that it is only the beginning of a second decline.

Mahlzeiten can be judged from at least two viewpoints, an artistic one and a pragmatic one. Artistically the film is on firm footing. It is certainly one of the best productions currently being shown in Germany, which does not guarantee it immortality, but which does set it apart from the trivial works to which movie goers are so frequently subjected on both sides of the Atlantic. Pragmatically, the film probably neither harms nor enhances the Church's image in Germany. Rolf's religious conversion in no way accelerates his decline, but many German Saints will object to the idea that their Church attracts the kind of people portrayed in the film,³ and some Mormon viewers may feel that the sanctity of religious conversion is violated by its inclusion in a profane motion picture. I believe, however, that most spectators will agree that Reitz uses the Mormon scenes honestly and artistically. Religion unfortunately does not always supply the solutions to all of life's problems. I found in *Mahlzeiten* a sensitive, meaningful study of one family's unsuccessful search for fulfillment.

³Deviant or criminal behavior by members of "sects" is given wide publicity in Germany's sensationalistic press. Typical is the coverage given a thirteen-year-old Mormon girl's suicide by *Bild-Zeitung* (Oct. 14, 1965), Germany's most popular newspaper. *Bild*, which enjoys a daily circulation of over four million copies, laid the blame for the girl's death at the feet of her father, who allegedly spent too much time at church and too little at home.

MORMON LIVES

Davis Bitton

Melvin J. Ballard: Crusader for Righteousness. (No author given.) Salt Lake City, Utah: Bookcraft, 1966. 293 pp. \$3.50

B. H. Roberts: A Biography. By Robert H. Malan. Salt Lake City, Utah: Deseret Book Company, 1966. xii + 151 pp. \$2.95. David Bitton, who teaches European history at the University of Utah, has an avid interest in Mormon history and has published in this area in *Dialogue*.

Among Mormon leaders of the past generation few were as charismatic as Melvin J. Ballard and B. H. Roberts. Both, in different ways, were significant in the shaping of twentieth-century Mormonism. Both deserve solid biographies. Unfortunately, the recent works which treat the lives of these two General Authorities do not fill the need. In fact, they perpetuate, at least to some extent, the superficiality which we have come to expect of Mormon biography.