

THE HISTORIANS AND MORMON NAUVOO RICHARD L. BUSHMAN



Were a nineteenth-century Mormon to assess the current scholarly literature on the Mormons in Illinois, or on Mormon history in general for that matter, he would probably be perplexed. While compelled to admit that the studies are informative and interesting, he would be eaten up with curiosity to know where the authors stood. He would wish to know whether the authors were friends or enemies of the Mormons. He might very well conclude that a flock of Richard Burtons¹ — interested observers, strangely aloof from the important questions of the truth of the Church's claims and the prophetic powers of Joseph Smith and Brigham Young, and therefore not quite to the point — had descended on the archives of Mormonism. The intellectual commerce between men on both sides of the critical dividing lines would be equally puzzling. In the nineteenth century the historical testimony used by Mormon historians was dismissed by non-Mormons as blind infatuation for Joseph and his works. Mormons on the other hand would give no credence to the statements of men who hated the Prophet and the Church. Mutual distrust separated the warring camps so far that all they could hear were the curses each called down on the others' heads. How surprising therefore that a book by a Catholic with the hearty name of O'Dea should be read and praised by Mormons and non-Mormons alike, or that a Reorganite, of all things, a Josephite, could write a book on Nauvoo, the very place where the path divided, and Utah Mormons, devoted Brighamites, would find much to praise in it.² One need only list the major scholarly works of the last ten or fifteen years to recognize how the barriers have fallen and how historians of varying personal persuasions can now converse readily on a subject that once was a call to battle.³

¹The best edition of Burton's report on the Mormons is Richard F. Burton, *The City of the Saints and Across the Rocky Mountains to California*, ed. Fawn M. Brodie (New York, 1963).

²Thomas F. O'Dea, *The Mormons* (Chicago, 1957); Robert Bruce Flanders, *Nauvoo: Kingdom on the Mississippi* (Urbana, Illinois, 1965).

³Besides O'Dea and Flanders, see for example: Leonard Arrington, *Great Basin Kingdom: An Economic History of the Latter-day Saints, 1830-1900* (Cambridge, 1958); Norman F. Furniss, *The Mormon Conflict, 1850-1859* (New Haven, Conn., 1960); Wallace Stegner, *The Gathering of Zion: The Story of the Mormon Trail* (New York, 1964); Juanita Brooks, *The Mountain Meadows Massacre* (Stanford, Calif., 1950); Ray B. West, *Kingdom of the*

While for many reasons we can welcome the measure of ecumenism that has visited Mormon historiography in recent years, our nineteenth-century Mormon might find the new works disappointing. I suspect that he would wonder what the point was. For him Mormon history was to glorify God's work among men and tell the story of salvation. While he might denounce those who attacked the Kingdom, at least they spoke to the vital question: the truth and authority of Joseph's doctrine and priesthood. These were claims to stir the imagination. Something of universal cosmic significance was at stake. When historians began to write, the salvation of humanity was really the issue. How could our nineteenth-century Mormon help but feel that the modern works, while erudite and facile, are not only dispassionate but insipid and, really, somewhat irrelevant — in short, academic.

We can safely disregard the perplexity of this obviously narrow-minded provincial, so totally unfamiliar with twentieth-century scholarship, industry, and the desire for professional advancement which powers our writing. He would be insensitive to a new temper among Mormons and a new purpose, not so intense or dramatic as their forefathers', but just as serious and sincere. This new generation of Mormons reads and writes the Church's history partly for its intrinsic interest but also as an act of self-discovery. We are more distant from Joseph and the foundations of the Church, but the Kingdom is now well-established and large in wealth, numbers, and achievements. Personal experiences have given many Mormons assurances of the truth and goodness of our faith. Enemies have mellowed and no longer threaten to overturn the Church. Consequently, many Mormons feel less defensive, less obliged to deny every aspersion and to exalt every act of the Prophet. Rather than being a device to promote the Church, Mormon history becomes an investigation of our own roots, a quest for identity rather than a quest for authority. Joseph is receding into the historical past now, and the changes in our larger environment are blocking our view of him. History serves to restore him to our field of vision. Rather than wishing to defend the Prophet, modern Mormons wish to know him and to understand more clearly the origins of the Kingdom to which we have pledged ourselves. The time interval between us and the early Church makes us curious; security in the faith makes us willing to accept whatever is discovered. Although written in a different key nowadays, the history of Mormonism still has vital import for readers and authors.

This quest may lend a deeper human meaning to Mormon history for Mormons, but what about non-Mormons? Do they read about Mormons as they would of "the Hottentots, the hairy Ainu, and the wild men of Borneo?"⁴ Judging from the accounts that still make their way into historical survey texts,

Saints: The Story of Brigham Young and the Mormons (New York, 1957); William Mulder, *Homeward to Zion: The Mormon Migrations from Scandinavia* (Minneapolis, 1957); Klaus Hansen, *Quest for Empire: The Political Kingdom of God and the Council of Fifty in Mormon History* (East Lansing, Mich., 1967). Leonard Arrington puts this transformation in historical perspective in "Scholarly Studies of Mormonism in the Twentieth Century," *Dialogue*, I (Spring, 1966), 15-32.

⁴Arrington, "Scholarly Studies," p. 16.

they do. Mormonism strikes many as a bizarre oddity that holds the same fascination as the visions of Emanuel Swedenborg or the divine lore of the Icelandic sagas.⁵ But I would guess that for Americans, as for Mormons, a more serious question stands behind the current interest in the Latter-day Saint past, and that is, "What can be learned from Mormon history about the American identity?"

Mormons delight in Andrew White's account of Tolstoy's inquiry after "the American religion," meaning Mormonism. While the query was not as flattering as we suppose, it nonetheless points up how closely Mormonism is bound to America, how much it is an expression of our national culture. And yet in the nineteenth century the Church was never at home in the United States. American and Mormon values clashed so violently that pitched battles frequently occurred. That fact raises problems that an American may wonder about. Were the Mormons truly Americans? If so why was there constant conflict? Were the Mormons so strange, so foreign that they were properly expelled from the country? Or were they really brothers of the same blood, though of different garb, who should never have been cast out and now should be welcomed back? In answering these questions an American must decide about himself and his kind. What is an American? How broad are the boundaries of this land?

Both quests for identity, the Mormon and the American, lead to Nauvoo, for there the major issues are all in focus. There, for the first time, Mormonism achieved social and doctrinal maturity. As O'Dea has suggested, by the Nauvoo period Mormons had withdrawn far enough from conventional society to innovate freely.⁶ While still perceptibly inhibited, in Nauvoo Joseph could teach principles that he had previously kept to himself for fear of shocking even the faithful. At the same time, the Church was still in close proximity to gentile society and the tensions between the two were fully displayed. Frontier America and full-blown Mormonism confronted each other directly in Hancock County in the 1840's. The Mormons who wish to discover primitive Mormonism and the Americans who wish to discover the limitations of American freedom are most likely to find their answers there.

If you will grant me that the Mormon period in Illinois does occupy this critical position, what then do current works on the Mormons in Illinois have to tell us? As anyone experienced with the ways of historiography would guess, there is nothing in the works of the last twenty years that is entirely new. None of them introduces any broad new subjects that Brodie or Roberts did not at least mention. As is always the case in the writing of history, the emphasis makes the difference. Judging from my review of the specialized works on Illinois and the major surveys of Mormonism, any writing on the Nauvoo period is likely to touch on certain basic topics:⁷ the move from

⁵Jerald C. Brauer writes about Mormons with tongue in cheek in his *Protestantism in America: A Narrative History* (Philadelphia, 1953). Clifton E. Olmsted, *History of Religion in the United States* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J., 1960), is more severely factual.

⁶O'Dea, *The Mormons*, p. 53.

⁷One exception is E. Cecil McGavin whose *Nauvoo the Beautiful* (Salt Lake City, 1946), mainly lauds the character of the Prophet and deplores the persecution he suffered.

Missouri and the settlement at Commerce; missionary work in Britain and resultant immigration; the development of Nauvoo, including land purchases, the Nauvoo House and the Temple, the Charter, the Legion, and economic policies; the development of doctrine, including polygamy, baptism for the dead, and the temple ceremonies, which are usually treated in relation to Masonry; the conflict of the Church with the State of Missouri and with Illinois citizens as politics increased tensions; the plans for a westward move; the *Expositor* affair and the martyrdom; the transmission of authority and the resultant splintering; and finally the exodus. Those topics represent the major categories of available data from which the historian can choose materials for his account. While historical facts seem quite fixed to the inexperienced, as anyone who has written history knows, such a rich supply of data permits historians to write quite different stories while drawing on the same bank of information.

I would say that until the last decade or so, the themes that have most intrigued twentieth-century historians have been doctrine and social conflict. Joseph's teachings in this period are irresistible targets. How can a contemporary writer be expected to disregard the salacious tastes of our time and not play heavily on the introduction of polygamy and the rumors passed around in the backrooms of Nauvoo? Mrs. Brodie, who is now generally cited as the standard authority on Joseph's marriages and suspected marriages, devoted three full chapters to polygamy. Half of another chapter dwelt on the esoteric temple ceremonies.⁸ Perhaps because B. H. Roberts knew from firsthand experience that polygamy was not so romantic as Mrs. Brodie made it out to be, he gave far less space to it. Other doctrines did interest him, particularly those concerning the nature of God and the divine potential of man as explicated by Joseph in the "King Follett Discourse."⁹ But for Roberts the major theme of the period was conflict — with law officers from Missouri, with the citizens of Illinois, and, to a lesser extent, with dissident followers of the Prophet. Already by this point in his history, the preoccupation with lawsuits, government action, and persecution that was to overwhelm the later volumes was in evidence in Roberts' work. Two others have focused on the same theme. Kenneth Godfrey's doctoral dissertation at Brigham Young University describes the sources of conflict with gentile settlers in Hancock County, and Jan Shipp's doctoral thesis at the University of Colorado concentrates on Mormon political controversies.¹⁰ The only major survey of

⁸Fawn M. Brodie, *No Man Knows My History: The Life of Joseph Smith the Mormon Prophet* (New York, 1957). Chapters xxi, xxii, and xxiv treat polygamy; chapter xix deals with the temple.

⁹B. H. Roberts, *A Comprehensive History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Century I* (6 vols.; Salt Lake City, 1930). Volume II deals with the Nauvoo period. Roberts probably also played down polygamy to help calm remaining nineteenth-century animosity against the Mormons. The "King Follett Discourse" was a funeral sermon which Joseph Smith preached for his deceased friend before a congregation which allegedly included twenty thousand people. This sermon soon became famous because of the inclusion of new and weighty matters of doctrine.

¹⁰Kenneth W. Godfrey, "Causes of Mormon Non-Mormon Conflict in Hancock County, Illinois, 1839-1846" (Ph.D. dissertation, Brigham Young University, 1967); Jan Shipp,

early Mormon history written in the last twenty years, Ray B. West's *Kingdom of the Saints*, follows the lines laid down by Brodie and Roberts and pays special heed to both doctrine and conflict: polygamy and the temple receive more attention than any other subject in the chapter entitled "Nauvoo," and another entire chapter is given over to conflict in Illinois. The picture that finally emerges from this group of works is of a beleaguered Joseph persistently elaborating his teachings in ways that only added to his troubles. Growing hostility generated by political rivalries and the propagation of strange doctrines combined to move the Prophet irresistibly toward martyrdom.

While the tragic drama that unfolded at Nauvoo is likely to continue to attract historians, some of the most recent and most distinguished works have stressed other themes and, by so doing, have given Nauvoo history, and Mormon history in general, a new flavor. The common element in the new books is an emphasis on the organization of Mormon society. Previous historians have said that the fundamental cause of Mormon-gentile conflict was that the Saints' closely-knit, centrally-controlled, corporate society differed too radically from ordinary American individualism and pluralism. Recent writers have investigated Mormon corporatism more carefully. The subtitle of Robert Flanders' *Nauvoo: Kingdom on the Mississippi*, tells readers clearly enough where his interests lie. He discusses Joseph Smith's social ideals and ideas and the details of their implementation; he describes the mixture of religious purpose and social need that went into the formation of Mormon society in Illinois. In a book of 341 pages of text, only ten are devoted to polygamy, while three chapters of the eleven are headed "A Kingdom of This World" and talk about government and the military, land business, industry, and finance. Another chapter discusses the Nauvoo House and the Temple, and still another "The Church Corporate as Body Politic." Obviously, the center of Professor Flanders' interest is not in conflict, in Roberts' sense, which receives about a chapter and a half, nor in doctrine, but in the ways Mormons set about to organize a city and in the resulting successes as well as tensions. As Professor Flanders says, "In Nauvoo the young latter-day prophet made his most prodigious effort to establish a utopian community," an effort that set the pattern for later community building in Utah and also one that convinced many Mormons — those who later refused to follow Brigham Young — that they preferred "a simpler, more orthodox manifestation of the faith" to the corporate Mormonism of Nauvoo.¹¹ In a sense, Flanders' work is an introduction to Leonard Arrington's *Great Basin Kingdom*. Both concentrate on the role of the Church in practical affairs. They are, you might say, business histories of the Mormons and display the same

"The Mormons in Politics: The First Hundred Years" (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Colorado, 1965). George R. Gayler, in "A Social, Economic, and Political Study of the Mormons in Western Illinois, 1839-1848: A Re-Evaluation" (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Indiana, 1955), also concentrates mainly on conflict but sympathizes with the non-Mormon settlers.

¹¹Flanders' introduction to *Nauvoo* forecasts clearly the main intent of the work. The quotes above are on pp. v, vi.

fascination with economic and political organization and the way Church leaders combined ecclesiastical and social powers to get the job done.

Someone might object to Flanders' use of the word "Utopian" to describe community building in either Nauvoo or Utah. In both cases, it might be argued that sheer physical necessity compelled ecclesiastical involvement in practical affairs. Church leaders had no choice but to occupy themselves with land procurement and distribution, merely to keep their people alive. However, Flanders gives some evidence that Joseph's vision transcended the immediate necessities and that he linked his plans for Nauvoo to much grander schemes for the development of the Kingdom of God. Klaus Hansen and Hyrum Andrus, in shorter works devoted specifically to Joseph's concept of the Kingdom, outline the structure of Joseph's larger purposes.¹² They tell how Joseph, just a few months before his death in 1844, organized a political system distinct from the Church but under the direction of the Priesthood, apparently with the intention of preparing a government through which Christ could reign upon his return. The Prophet, for these historians, was a Utopian of the most expansive sort, not that he dreamed of a paradise that existed "nowhere," as, strictly speaking, the word Utopia implies, but that his immediate operations in Nauvoo were tied to a vision of an ideal world community which assured peace and liberty to men everywhere. Hansen and Andrus confirm Flanders' assertion that Mormonism was not a simple faith comparable to Presbyterianism or Methodism. It was a program for a total society under God, intentionally mingling religion with politics and devotion to God with economics. As Hansen and Andrus tell the story, the Prophet's political theory, as well as the poverty of his people, committed him to create for the Saints a complete society grounded in religious principles.

As one might expect, the works of Flanders, Hansen, and Andrus differ somewhat in emphasis. Flanders focuses on Joseph's actual involvement in Nauvoo affairs, while Hansen deals with the Prophet's conception of millennial government and the steps he took to implement his ideas. Andrus describes the plan for world government as one who explicitly subscribes to Joseph's vision. But all three writers show that at Nauvoo Mormonism was more than a religious faith in the conventional sense. It was a complete social order that confidently joined civil and religious authority.

The envelopment of economics and politics in religion had, of course, begun earlier in Ohio and Missouri, where the revelations had directed the Saints to consecrate their property to the Church and to run their farms as stewardships. Joseph had also organized a bank at Kirtland and sold land at Far West. But corporate Mormonism had brought such grief within the Church and such suffering at the hands of the gentiles that Joseph might very well have emerged from Liberty Jail resigned to the abandonment of communal Mormonism. The Saints scattered along the banks of the Mississippi might have been left to their own devices and permitted to move

¹²Hansen, *Quest for Empire*; Hyrum L. Andrus, *Joseph Smith and World Government* (Salt Lake City, 1958).

wherever they could find acceptance. The Prophet might then have ministered solely to their spiritual needs and let faith become simply a dimension of life rather than its absorbing all.¹³ Instead he gathered the Saints to Nauvoo and undertook to govern their lives more thoroughly than ever before. Indeed the punishment in Missouri only persuaded him to seek control over courts, militia and city government, the better to make safe a haven for the good society.¹⁴ Nauvoo demonstrated that Joseph was incorrigibly committed to forming a religious society rather than a mere church. As O'Dea has said, at Nauvoo the Mormons went far toward becoming a people, even a nation.¹⁵ That accomplishment seems to be the central point of recent Mormon scholarship.

Those Mormons who read Church history in pursuit of their own religious identity may indeed draw lessons from Nauvoo. In light of the current works, there can be no question but that the early leaders refused to restrict themselves to a narrowly conceived religion. They were not content to discourse on past times and distant places. They not only expressed political opinions, they immersed themselves in practical politics. Those who dislike the present-day involvement of the Utah Church in business and its leaders' propensity to read sermons to the government from the Tabernacle can find little comfort in a study of Nauvoo. They must conclude it has always been so. Joseph's faith followed the bent of his mind, and there was small regard for the conventional separation of church and state.¹⁶

At the same time, those Mormons who would read of Nauvoo and then pull out all the stops on political preaching, should read again. Joseph's story ended not in the New Jerusalem but at Carthage. Corporatism and intermingling of church and state have consistently offended Americans and brought their wrath upon the Saints. Learning from experience, the twentieth-century Church in Utah has adopted a far more cautious position. True enough, the Church is still involved in business, and each General Conference brings its share of political talks, but such forays are comparatively limited. The Church has no intention of trying to regulate a secular society which is really beyond its control, at the jeopardy of ecclesiastical and spiritual programs.¹⁷ The social idealism of Nauvoo, the hope for a truly righteous and peaceful society, has, for the time being, been left to individual Mormons to nurture. Nauvoo may frustrate Mormons in a quest for identity, for their history in Illinois reveals both the Prophet's high aspirations, and

¹³This possibility is raised in O'Dea, *The Mormons*, p. 50.

¹⁴Documents and commenatry to this effect are found in G. Homer Durham, ed., *Joseph Smith Prophet-Statesman: Readings in American Political Thought* (Salt Lake City, 1944).

¹⁵O'Dea, *The Mormons*, p. 75.

¹⁶J. D. Williams discusses the complexities of Church involvement in politics in "The Separation of Church and State in Mormon Theory and Practice," *Dialogue*, I (Summer, 1966), 30-54.

¹⁷Klaus Hansen suggests that the Utah Church is fast retreating from its nineteenth-century concern for the total social order. See his review of Flanders, "The World and the Prophets," *Dialogue*, I (Summer, 1966), 103-107.

the bickering, tawdriness, and hate that followed implementation of those aspirations.

I am quite sure that many Mormons will read the recent works on Nauvoo with questions about their own faith in mind. To some extent, Mormons are still committed to their history as a revelation of God's will. By contrast, most Americans nowadays do not appear to be nearly so serious in their study of Mormonism, although in the nineteenth century many of them were. Mormonism then was a foil, like Indians, Catholics, or Masons, the picture of what a good American was not.¹⁸ The delineation of a negative identity in the minority groups served to secure the positive identity of the majority. Mormons were lustful and lecherous, slaves to the tyrant Brigham Young, fanatics in belief, in short, un-American. Americans were therefore virtuous, free, and reasonable. In advocating the elimination of the worst of Mormonism, the anti-Mormon campaigners sought to cut out of themselves what they hated and feared.

One might miss this seriousness of purpose in the twentieth-century literature. Ray West noted, in an extraordinarily perceptive essay published in 1957, that in sympathetic accounts of Mormonism, the story is usually told "as a comic episode in American history." Writers have been drawn irresistibly to the funny side of buried plates, peepstones, and multiple wives. West notes, however, that comedy also has serious purposes and refers to Bergson's theory that comedy is a way to account for the unique individual; it creates types to define a species. By describing that which is strange and frightening in a simplistic way and by laughing at it, comedy brings the fearful under control.¹⁹ In America, comedy has been an instrument of social assimilation. The Katzenjammer Kids or Mick Finn of the funny papers served an important purpose for a nation trying to assimilate a vast number of immigrants all at once. Like caricatures of the sharp-dealing Jew or the Negro sambo, the comic strip German and Irish stereotypes helped to organize the immigrants in the American mind and make the onslaught of foreigners less appalling. Something like this goes on in the literature about Mormons. Even though the caricatures of Joseph Smith are offensive to Mormons, we should recognize in the rather low comedy an attempt to fix an image and even to make friends. However, West sees clearly that the laughs are not completely good-natured, particularly in the comedy of Linn and Brodie, where he detects hostility and resentment.²⁰ Like the sambo image of the Negro, spoofing about Mormons was really an effort to put them down. But writing a Mormon comedy is a step closer to acceptance than an exposé

¹⁸David Brion Davis explicates the imagery of subversive minority groups in "Some Themes of Counter-Subversion: An Analysis of Anti-Masonic, Anti-Catholic, and Anti-Mormon Literature," *Mississippi Valley Historical Review*, XLVII (September, 1960), 205-224. The projection of negative feelings on Indians is discussed in Roy Harvey Pearce, *The Savages of America: A Study of the Indian and the Idea of Civilization* (Rev. ed.; Baltimore, 1965).

¹⁹West, *Kingdom of the Saints*, pp. xiii-xiv. The Linn referred to by West is William Alexander Linn, author of *The Story of the Mormons from the Date of Their Origin to the Year 1901* (New York, 1902).

²⁰West, *Kingdom of the Saints*, pp. xv-xviii.

of Mormon debauchery. The humorous touch conceals a concern to find a place for Mormons as well as to put them in it.

The new attention in historical literature to the American qualities in Mormonism continues the assimilation process. There seems to be an elaborate search for congruences. William Mulder opened an essay on "The Mormons in American History" by saying that Mormonism was as "native to the United States as Indian corn and the buffalo nickel."²¹ Confidence in human ability and in man's capacity for unlimited progression are the Mormon characteristics most often cited as American in spirit; Mulder finds countless other similarities and parallels and probably even so does not exhaust the possibilities. Thomas O'Dea sees Mormon history recapitulating American history from the initial colonization and sense of being chosen to the break with the homeland.²² Robert Flanders has pictured Joseph Smith as a Jacksonian entrepreneur. "The image which emerges in the following pages," Flanders says at the beginning of his book, "is a man of affairs — planner, promoter, architect, entrepreneur, executive, politician, filibusterer. . . ."²³ That picture accords perfectly with the archetypal Jacksonian man as historians now envisage him, and makes Joseph Smith seem all the more at home in nineteenth-century America.

Most Mormons resist the imputation that they are nothing more than American and that Joseph merely drew from his environment without the advantage of revelation, but the intense patriotism of Church members and their exaltation of the Constitution attest to an urge to be assimilated. In his history of the Church, Roberts went to some length to refute the legend that the Saints had raised the American flag on Ensign Peak on the second day after their arrival in the valley of the Great Salt Lake.²⁴ In contradistinction to their nineteenth-century alienation, Mormons now wish to prove themselves perfectly loyal. Brigham Young University may well be the only college campus in the country where the flag is raised and lowered every day to the accompaniment of the "National Anthem," while everyone within earshot of the loudspeakers stands at attention.

Objective scholarship with its dispassionate stance may be the last stage in the process of assimilation. The recent works in their effort to treat all parties with perfect fairness and to offend no one reflect a strong desire for peace with former enemies. They seem to say that as gentlemen, friends, and scholars our common qualities transcend our differences. But if that is the significance of their tone, it strikes me personally as being somewhat inaccurate. Flanders' work, in particular, is a sober reminder of the differences between Mormons and Americans and the grim consequences for any group that departs from conventional American norms. No matter what data one

²¹Mulder, *The Mormons in American History*. Twenty-first Annual Frederick William Reynolds Lecture (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Extension Division, 1957).

²²O'Dea, *The Mormons*, p. 117. David Brion Davis approaches the same point from a slightly different direction in "The New England Origins of Mormonism," *New England Quarterly*, XXVI (June, 1953), 147-168.

²³Flanders, *Nauvoo*, p. vi.

²⁴Roberts, *Comprehensive History*, III, 271-274.

chooses to stress, the story of the Mormons in Illinois ends with death and expulsion. Nauvoo seems to me to demonstrate that Mormons were not wholly American in that their vision of a complete society run by a prophet simply could not be realized within the United States in the 1840's. For the Mormon experiment in social reconstruction to continue it was necessary to leave the United States and to isolate the Church in the desert.²⁵ Mormonism may have begun in an American setting and carried many things American into the Great Basin, but at last the faith of the Saints transcended the boundaries of American culture.

Mormons and gentiles in Illinois in 1846 would have agreed that the Latter-day Saints did not belong in the United States and the concurrence on that point raises questions about the nature of American pluralism. For all their ties to American culture, the Mormons finally were cut off, violently expelled. Political liberty and religious tolerance could not stretch to accommodate Mormonism. Granted that Mormons did much to offend their gentile neighbors, but was American freedom meant only for groups that were inoffensive? After examining the events at Nauvoo, a student of the American identity may be driven to ask if only those who conformed were secure in the United States in the nineteenth century. Louis Hartz has argued that Americans then and now have been notably intolerant of ideologies that do not follow their particular brand of liberalism. The uncontested supremacy of republicanism since the eighteenth century has led us to equate that ideology and its associated values with truth and reality and to interpret every departure from it as outlandish and devilish.²⁶ Hartz believes that we are still fearful of ideas which are foreign or antagonistic to our own. Not that Elijah Lovejoy (an abolitionist shot by a mob in Illinois in 1837) or Joseph Smith would be lynched were they to reappear in the twentieth century, but we have our modern equivalents — alien ideologies of Black Power and radical social reform provoke violent responses in some parts of the land. Though polygamy is gone, there are Mormon doctrines that still threaten to bring on discriminatory legislation or violent harassment. The breadth of American pluralism is yet to be measured in our time, and we may discover that in subtle forms the history of Nauvoo can be repeated. The history of the Mormons in Illinois reminds us of regrettable tendencies in the American character that we must ever stand ready to counter.

While Mormons and Americans can learn from Nauvoo as it now stands in the books, the whole story has not yet been told. At their best Mormons appear as enterprising, ingenious, and strong, but the spiritual dimensions of their faith are left unrecorded. Fawn Brodie says bluntly that Joseph's spiritual legacy was barren, and the religion he created devoid of "spiritual content."²⁷ Flanders, who probably has another view of the Prophet, an-

²⁵Hansen discusses the question of whether or not the Saints meant to move out of the United States into Mexican territory in *Quest for Empire*, pp. 111-120.

²⁶Louis Hartz, *The Liberal Tradition in America: An Interpretation of American Political Thought Since the Revolution* (New York, 1955).

²⁷Brodie, *No Man Knows My History*, p. 403.

nounces beforehand that he will not treat him "as a great religious teacher, evangelist, and lawgiver."²⁸ The promoter, executive and entrepreneur is about all we see in the book. But is it possible to understand Nauvoo or Utah or either of the Mormon churches today without grasping the spiritual power Joseph exercised and still exercises? Every Mormon knows that the Church is held together by individual testimonies — that is, the connection the members have found with God through the Prophet's doctrine and the Church which he established. The power of Mormon leaders depends almost entirely on these individual spiritual convictions. If anything, Joseph's power over the inner lives of his followers was even more intense. They were not simply westering Americans infatuated with the Prophet's promises of Utopia. Through Joseph they found God, and it was the measure of divinity in him and his teachings that held them.²⁹ Nauvoo would never have risen or fallen without that spiritual life. Belief powered the entire enterprise.

To recapture the life of the spirit is, of course, immensely difficult. As Richard Burton admitted in his revealing study of the Mormons, the inward faith of a people is the last thing an outsider can reach. Certainly no mere summary of the doctrines, however inflated by pretentious rhetoric, can recreate the spirit of Mormon convictions, and unfortunately there are few artistic works powerful enough to convey the quality of Mormon faith to non-believers. The depth of early Mormon spiritual life is most apparent in unrehearsed sermons, homespun poetry, and hurried journal entries where it may go unrecognized for what it is. Probably the testimonies of the Saints will yield, if at all, only to sensibilities as keen as William James'. We need a Mormon "Varieties of Religious Experience," with long quotes from Mormons themselves, to give us authentic Mormonism.³⁰ Whatever the difficulties, such a study would be well worth the effort. Besides illuminating every period of Mormon history, Nauvoo among them, it would put modern Mormons who share their forefather's convictions in touch with their ancestors, and make it possible to identify more perfectly with the past.³¹ And it would remind those Americans who would see Mormons only in their own activist, empire-building image that people of this Nation are capable of higher devotions and deeper spirituality than perhaps has been imagined. Mormons and Americans who search history to tell them of themselves would find in an account of Mormon faith a confirmation of those very qualities which our times most require of us.

²⁸Flanders, *Nauvoo*, p. vi.

²⁹A poignant example of how former Mormons yearned for the spiritual experiences they had enjoyed with him is recorded in Inez Smith Davis, *The Story of the Church* (6th ed.; Independence, Mo., 1959), pp. 422-423.

³⁰William Mulder and A. Russell Mortensen, eds., *Among the Mormons: Historic Accounts by Contemporary Observers* (New York, 1958), captures other qualities of the Mormon experience better than the spiritual ones.

³¹Mormons return to Joseph Fielding Smith's *Essentials in Church History: A History of the Church from the Birth of Joseph Smith to the Present Time . . .* (18th ed.; Salt Lake City, 1963), despite its shortcomings, because it recovers some of the spirit that moved the early Church.



Joseph Smith III, 1832-1914 — President, Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, 1860-1914.