

REVIEWS

Edited by Davis Bitton

An Uncertain Voice in the Wilderness

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The Voice of one Crying in the Wilderness: Sidney Rigdon, Religious Reformer, 1793-1876. By F. Mark McKiernan. Lawrence, Kansas: Coronado Press, 1972. \$7.50.

When so many biographies of early Mormons are made immaculate (and superficial) by filial piety, it borders on the tragic when an historian seeking to write an objective life of Sidney Rigdon fails in many ways to expand or deepen our understanding. Despite the inclusion of a much needed chapter on Rigdon's post-1844 career, F. Mark McKiernan's *The Voice of one Crying in the Wilderness: Sidney Rigdon Religious Reformer* is disappointing. Its deficiencies often seem rooted in the academician's perilous prerequisite — publish or perish. McKiernan, professor of history at Idaho State University, may have allowed the pressures for productivity to affect the publication of a study which in many ways seems unfinished. The volume shows signs of haste: factual and interpretive errors, clumsy writing, poor conceptualization, inadequate research. What might have been an important contribution is often no more than a rehash of well known history, history at times related but incidentally to Sidney Rigdon.

Factual mistakes mar the book. Contrary to McKiernan, there is evidence in the ledger book of the Kirtland Safety Society at the Chicago Historical Society that only a few Mormons, and not the major dissenters, lost money in the bank (p. 78). Opposition to the bank and to Joseph Smith in 1837 must be explained on other grounds. Alexander Doniphan's bill to organize a Mormon county passed the Missouri legislature in 1836 but did not, as McKiernan affirms (p. 81), encompass Ray and Daviess counties. Lilburn W. Boggs successfully opposed the original bill and restricted the Saints to Caldwell County. Failure to perceive this makes the Mormon war of 1838 difficult to explain. Joseph Smith was tried before Austin A. King in September, 1838, but in a farmhouse in Caldwell County, where he felt secure, rather than at Richmond as McKiernan maintains (p. 90). The names of Joseph Smith and Nancy Rigdon, as Benjamin Winchester suggests, were first linked in Kirtland, not Nauvoo (pp. 113-115). McKiernan misjudges the reason for Rigdon's excommunication in 1844, designating it "partisanship" (p. 155). But there was more than partisanship involved since Rigdon had initiated his own movement by ordaining prophets, priests and kings, thus threatening the unity of the Church. Rigdon's

letters to Stephen Post, deposited in the Historical Department of the Church archives at Salt Lake City in the fall of 1971 but not utilized by McKiernan, provide evidence that Rigdon was not isolated from all Mormon groups during the last thirty years of his life (pp. 133, 144), but that he remained actively engaged in trying to establish the Kingdom of God. In 1864 he received a revelation which instructed Post, Joseph Newton, William Stanly, and Abraham Burtis to flee the wrath to come and gather at Council Bluffs.

Was John C. Bennett's sponsoring of the Nauvoo charter, the Legion, and Free Masonry largely responsible for the destruction of Nauvoo (pp. 109, 124)? Or were there deeper antagonisms between Mormons and non-Mormons which would have been manifest without Bennett? Mormon experience in Ohio and Missouri before Bennett joined the Church suggests the latter view. Anti-Mormon literature makes it clear that Mormon collectivist institutions, however modified, were more objectionable than personalities and programs.

In writing and organization McKiernan's book frequently lacks finesse. McKiernan tells us (p. 17) that Rigdon died in 1876 but he and his wife, Phebe, "lived together in harmony . . . until she died in 1886." Chapter II deals with the advent of Mormonism to Ohio, but continues for four additional pages to treat the theme of the preceding chapter, Rigdon's relationship to Alexander Campbell. Chapter III terminates in 1832 with the mobbing of Rigdon and Joseph Smith, inferring some special significance in this incident. But the significance is not explained. At several places McKiernan introduces a topic, drops it, and then takes it up again, destroying the continuity of the story (pp. 45, 52-57, 113, 115). In his discussion of the Danites, Rigdon's role is minimized, yet a whole page is devoted to the Danite constitution (pp. 95-96). Rigdon's position on succession is given brief treatment, but Brigham Young's is criticized at length (pp. 128-130).

The book suffers more fundamentally in that the theme of Rigdon as religious reformer is not developed consistently. McKiernan does not tell us enough of Alexander Campbell as reformer nor does he treat early Mormonism as a reformation (or re-formation) of American Christianity. Thus Rigdon's attraction to these movements is not adequately explained. Research in the Stephen Post papers demonstrates that Rigdon spent five years at Friendship, New York, studying the prophecies of the Bible and of Joseph Smith, trying to discern his relationship to the destiny of Mormonism and to the destiny of the nations of the earth.

Rigdon as prophet, his mysticism and millennialism are slighted, and thus a basic ingredient of Rigdon's personality is unexamined. This leads to misunderstanding of the succession crisis in 1844. Brigham Young did not win the majority of Mormons merely by parliamentary maneuvers and public disparagement of the man from Pittsburgh. The truth is that there were no better claimants than Young available. Joseph Smith's son was too young, William Smith and Sidney Rigdon were erratic. Strang did not have status enough early enough to win many supporters. Young very wisely affirmed that he would not try to replace the Prophet but to carry out his programs. Rigdon made a similar public statement, but in private informed his followers that Joseph was a fallen prophet, thus casting doubt on his loyalty in the minds of most Mormons. If Joseph had in fact fallen, to whom would the Saints turn? Rigdon would not do. Most Mormons, like Newel K. Whitney, had little faith

in Rigdon's prophetic powers. Rigdon preached in 1844 that he held the keys of conquest and that he would triumphantly lead the Saints to battle against the United States and England, preparatory to the battle of God and Magog. Such wild apocalyptic utterances, characteristic of Rigdon, seemed extravagant to most Mormons. They seem to have sensed what Rigdon's son, John W., said in 1859. When some of the elders persuaded Rigdon to leave Friendship and preach at Centerville, it raised the anger of his son: "My father is in no condition to preach to any people he is a Maniac on religion & you did very wrong to influence him to leave his home." John W. may have been guilty of the Rigdon tendency to exaggerate, but a more thorough and thoughtful study is needed before we can be certain.

Sisyphus in the West

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Goldenrod. By Herbert Harker. New York: Random House, 1972. 186 pp. \$5.95.

In a recent *New Era* article (August 1972) Arthur Henry King made an incisive comment about Mormon literature: Mormon artists, he said, "need not write especially for Mormons, and they need not write especially on Mormon subjects" for the treatment to be inescapably Mormon. I cannot be sure that a Gentile would recognize the Mormonism in Herbert Harker's novel *Goldenrod*, but certainly here is a work which finds resonance in at least one Mormon soul, and a new talent which gives some substance to Dale Morgan's hope, expressed in *Dialogue's* issue on literature (Autumn 1969) that "there is going to be, as there is now, a Mormon literature, and on the whole, I think the best is yet to come."

Goldenrod makes literary sense on several levels. It's plot line is western, and Harker can suit his prose to the fast action of the rodeo circuit which is the milieu of his protagonist Jesse Gifford. A down-and-outer since a trouncing under the hooves of the bronc that had thrown him, Jesse, his back taped to protect the still fragile pelvis, tries for a comeback in the granddaddy rodeo, the Calgary Stampede, astride the saddle-bronc Polka Dot:

The chute opened. Polka Dot . . . stood for a moment, uncertainly. Then, with the same zest he had shown earlier, he spun on his heels and leaped into the arena. Jesse felt blue sky under him, but when the horse came down hard on all four feet, he chucked back into the saddle like a rifle bolt going home. He felt as if his encasement of adhesive tape had crumbled, his pelvis smashed with the shock. . . .

The story moves rapidly, with tight, concise prose. Flashbacks enlarge the plot so easily that the reader is hardly aware that it was a literary device and not an actuality which filled in the details.

Goldenrod does more than tell a western tale. There is a lyricism in Harker's setting of the western scene which not only puts the characters in a fitting locale, but creates that landscape and characterizes those people in a few deft strokes. The book begins: