

"The new neighbor. Mr. Weesner [his first novel was a Book of the Month Club selection]. Mr. Williams [he won the National Book Award last year]. And you." I laughed, though he wasn't teasing, and I knew that he was right. As I look at Amy, I know that my own self-possession has something to do with the pleasure I feel in her growth. Sometimes when I hear young mothers in our ward lament their inadequacies, talking like the poor mother I used to be, I want to stand up and pontificate: "Get out of the house. Find out what you're good at. Stop feeling sorry for yourself. Learn and grow." But I don't, for I know that I am not a happier and better mother at 37 than I was at 22 because I have taken night courses or written essays or read Erasmus, but because at 37 I have begun to understand the fruitful and uneasy and joyful and sometimes terrifying relationship between the woman I am and the woman I would like to be. That kind of learning can neither be hurried nor forced.

A Latter-day Ode to Irrigation

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In 1907 J. J. McClellan, then organist for the Mormon Tabernacle, published a new choral suite under the extravagant title, "Ode to Irrigation." The first of five choruses described in heavy Victorian prose a truly awesome primeval desert landscape where, "the candlesticks of the cactus flame torches here uphold," and "bones of man and beast lie together under the miragemock of death." After a brief blossoming under the ministrations of Pueblo Indians the land became again a Dantesque inferno until "to the throbbing of the fervent earth" the pioneers entered the scene. The composer chose a male chorus, backed by a soprano obbligato to announce that shortly after the Mormons came "green-walled thickets are choral with songs of birds," and the once lethal desert was transformed into a "land of leafy glades." The full chorus joined in the *finale*, "Glorious Land," to be sung "With fire and patriotic fervor."

Excesses of romantic hyperbole tend to conceal from the twentieth-century observer the core of truth which underlies this, as so much of folk literature. The land before 1847 was not as blasted as the lyricist suggested, nor as verdant thereafter. The transformation nonetheless had been dramatic. To many of those who sang "The Ode to Irrigation" in 1907 the changes they had seen meant the difference between dire necessity and comfortable plenty. With this thought in mind, we can no doubt forgive the Saints for singing such mauve poetry "With fire and patriotic fervor."

A writer more in the modern taste, Bernard DeVoto, chose metaphors almost as strong in describing the accomplishment of his Mormon grandfather, Jonathan Dye, in cultivating the desert:

Through a dozen years of Jonathan's journal we observe the settlers of Easton [Uinta] combining to bring water to their fields. On the bench lands above their valley, where gulches and canyons come down from the Wasatch, they made canals, which led along the hills. From the canals smaller ditches flowed down to each man's fields, and from these ditches he must dig veins and capillaries for himself. Where the water ran, cultivation was possible; where it didn't the sagebrush of the desert showed unbroken. Such cooperation forbade quarrels; one would as soon quarrel about the bloodstream.

Jonathan Dye's faith, DeVoto observed, had been "a superb instrument for the reclamation of the desert, for the creation of the West. . . . Is it clear that all this sprang from nothing at all?" DeVoto asked rhetorically.

That is the point. . . . There was here—nothing whatever. A stinking drouth, coyotes and rattlesnakes and owls, the movement of violet and silver and oliver-dun sage in white light—a dead land. But now there was a painted frame house under shade trees, fields leached of alkali, the blue flowers of alfalfa, flowing water, grain, gardens, orchards. . . . This in what had been a dead land.

Such warm praise, coming from a confirmed iconoclast who had been unsparing in his criticism of other aspects of Mormon society, would seem to have put the final seal of approval upon the Mormons' achievement in western agriculture. The resourcefulness of the Mormons in wresting abundance from the most forbidding wastelands has taken its place among the legends of American folklore. It has become a popular cliché that the Mormon pioneers made the desert blossom as the rose.

Obscured by the cliché, however, is a record of remarkable innovation and achievement in American agriculture. Common sense would prompt the Mormon pioneers to bring water to withering crops, but the development of irrigated agriculture on a regional basis involved problems of monumental scale and complexity. It was necessary to build an extensive network of dams, reservoirs, canals and ditches with only the crudest surveying instruments and without the aid of heavy machinery. Entirely new social institutions for building and maintaining the system and for apportioning the water equitably had to be developed. Once the delivery system was built the skills and techniques of applying water effectively to extensive fields had to be developed. Only those who have been confronted by a charging stream of water in midfield, armed with nothing but gum boots and an Ames shovel, and have attempted to make the stream lie down placidly and evenly over the dry surface, can fully appreciate what the Mormon pioneers had to learn.

I was recently reminded of how much I have forgotten from my youth on a family farm in Idaho. My father was able to work such wizardry with the water that he irrigated a ten acre beet field uphill for twenty years and never knew the difference. I assumed that such talents, after several generations of irrigation experience, had become permanently incorporated into the family's genetic code. Last summer when the soil in our small backyard garden in Salt Lake City appeared too dry for the germination of seeds I determined for the first time in many years to try my hand at irrigation. I carefully dug a head ditch and drain ditch at either end of the plot and scratched a grid of furrows between them, each furrow equidistant on either side from the rows of seeds I had planted. I then confidently turned a full hose of water into one corner of the grid, expecting that I could sit down comfortably into a lawn chair and watch the stream course through the system and saturate the waiting seeds.

After about fifteen minutes I found I had created an impressive mud puddle in that one corner of the garden, but the water stubbornly refused to venture into the inviting ditches and furrows. I then moved the hose from what I had intended to be the head ditch to the drain ditch. This worked better, but the water still flowed only into the first furrow and only about halfway. In the meantime the soil was melting like sugar and the whole system seemed in imminent danger of being washed out. Somewhat embarrassed, I accepted the advice of a neighbor and placed small rocks at the foot (now the head) of the furrows to regulate the flow into each. I finally got