

# Sainted Mothers

GENE A. SESSIONS

*Sister Saints*. Edited by Vicky Burgess-Olson. Provo, Utah: Brigham Young University Press, 1978. xiv+ 494 pp., illus. \$5.95, paper.

As this book about the sainted mothers of Mormonism was coming off the press, President Spencer Kimball was preparing his opening address for the 148th Annual Conference of the Church. Remembering the Utah IWY fiasco and the ERA imbroglio, he decided that it was time for the brethren to restate and to reaffirm the now familiar official LDS position on womanhood and sex roles. Few Mormons were surprised when on the morning of April 1, 1978, the prophet declared that the place of Mormon women was in the home where they might "fully express themselves as mothers, as nurses to the sick, as proponents of high community ideals and as protectors of good morals." Stating that this had been the position of the Church since the days of Joseph Smith, President Kimball went on to ask the inevitable questions to which many pained Mormon women would have no comfortable answers: "What more can any woman want for herself, what more could any man want for his wife . . . ?" In order to resolve the dilemma thus confronting them, these uneasy sister Saints would again turn anxiously to the past in an attempt to discover the roots of their problem. Perhaps there would be some answers in the new book from BYU Press about twenty-four Mormon women who seemed to have found the secret of being successful both as women and as Latter-day Saints.

Obviously hoping to come near the model of Claudia Bushman's admirable compilation *Mormon Sisters*, Vicky Burgess-Olson set out to solicit brief biographies of Mormon women who had

"achieved." She managed to acquire for her collection several previously published works by some pioneers in the field of Mormon women's studies. Eventually identifying additional subjects and authors willing to contribute, Burgess-Olson seemed on the way to filling a serious gap in Mormon historiography—a solid assemblage of biographical studies identifying the activities, contributions, and comparative experiences of several outstanding Mormon women. In the midst of this anticipation, her book finally appeared, possessing enough needless and serious flaws to make it not only inadequate but immensely disappointing as well.

While it is impossible to fault the excellence of many of the essays, particularly with some of those previously published or presented as lectures, the volume as a whole falls open to criticism on almost every count. Most noticeable, though perhaps least damning, is its physical package. Loaded with typographical and grammatical errors, grey pages, fuzzy photographs, and slipped type, it bears the mysterious appearance of extreme haste—mysterious given the time its editor and publisher had in which to put it together. Two contributors expressed shock to this reviewer that they had not seen galley proofs of their articles and that someone had made unacceptable changes in their texts. The volume possesses no index. In short, it is a shoddy production, unworthy of its press, its editor, and certainly many of its contributors.

This apparent hastiness also reflects itself in the editor's preface. Containing virtually no connective threads with which the reader might bind the essays together, it tip-toes through general Mormon history and then commits an intellectual faux pas that ought to redound to

Burgess-Olson's embarrassment for years to come: Discussing "Authors and Subjects" she is pleased to announce that "most are women and most are Mormons." Of the twenty contributors, most are indeed Mormons, but *all* claim to be women. One must wonder whether the editor thus accepts the chauvinist rib about women with brains forfeiting their femininity.

All of this would be more than excusable, if the contents of the book possessed enough redeeming qualities to render such blunders as mere headwagging annoyances. This is not the case with the bulk of the volume. Many of the essays suffer from three chronic diseases. The first of these, "tunnel vision," has perennially plagued both Mormon and women's studies. Simply stated, most of the authors in *Sister Saints* are rank amateurs when it comes to serious biography. More than half of them have had little or no formal training in history or in the historical method. They therefore demonstrate an ignorance of what was going on outside of Mormondom during the period about which they write, and have but little idea of what it takes to perform a meticulous historical study. As well might a historian venture into an archeological dig and expect to emerge with some respectable findings as some of these people trained in everything from music to English literature might expect to be able to produce sound history. Only a third of the contributors received degrees in history, though some working initially or primarily in other disciplines, such as Jill Mulvay Derr and Jean Bickmore White, have earned the title of historian through their persistent work and well-displayed knowledge of solid methodology. Much of *Sister Saints*, however, must be judged the floundering work of proverbial fish out of water.

The classic example of this deficiency comes in the editor's own introductory remarks when she naively states that Mormon leaders of the late nineteenth century were ahead of their times in their support of feminism. To advance her claim, she quotes out of context a statement from Brigham Young about how women ought "to enlarge their sphere of usefulness for the benefit of society at large" (p. viii). Apparently unaware of the *commonality* of this sort of statement among social and religious leaders of the

period across the nation, she is even more willing to forget myriads of other statements Brother Brigham and his associates made about the *subordinate* place of women in the Mormon universe.

A discovery of this first ailment leads quickly to an awareness of a second illness that has sucked much of the vitality from *Sister Saints*. In order to find a way through the dilemmas of Mormonism and womanhood, most of the authors have succumbed to the temptation to distort not only Mormon ecclesiastical attitudes but also the lives of their subjects themselves. Burdened with the hallucinatory effects of "biographer's disease," they have envisioned new pedestals for their women. While all of the twenty-four women must have been human, only a few of them come through their biographers' treatments without deification. The words with which the contributors choose to describe their subjects become so cliché by the end of the book, that one wonders if something about being Mormon and female automatically endows a person with patience, long-suffering, dignity, strength, warmth, wisdom, giftedness, astuteness, charm, grace, faith, hope, charity, ad infinitum, ad nauseam.

Indeed, sameness is the name of the third malady. Both in selection and portrayal, most of this group of "great mothers" (see Helen Diner, *Mothers and Amazons*) have too much in common, despite Burgess-Olson's statement in the beginning about their only similarities being their "gender and baptismal covenants" (p. vii). Their lives as portrayed in *Sister Saints* do little to describe the richness and variety of womanhood in the LDS experience. This book, in short, joins a discouraging trend in women's studies to make of them exaggerated minority studies, even though women comprise neither a minority nor an isolated segment of culture in need of overstatement. They are (and always have been) a vital part of every event and every theme in human history. To chronicle heroically and monotonously the lives of the exceptional few in the belief that this will redress ages of obscurity is to commit the final indignity to the billions of women in the world and to the millions of women in Mormondom who live and breathe in a real world, and who need honest answers, not literary epochs disguised as legitimate biography.